

For My Brother

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At the last minute, Uchiha Itachi decides he can't torture his brother, so he takes the only option available to him. It's going to take years of therapy to deal with this.

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Always Read The Authors' Notes

Chapter 1: Always Read The Authors' Notes

Sasuke burst through the front door of his home, panting. Outside was a nightmare of blood and death and fire. He'd been sick once already, but he had to come here; he *had* to make sure his parents were alright, even if the whole of the world was now a gore-soaked horror. He found Itachi waiting for him, a tantō in one hand, blood running down the blade. "Are they..." Sasuke stopped when he saw the familiar form lying on the stairs up to the second level. It wasn't completely familiar, since his mother normally had her head attached to her neck. He fell to his knees and gagged up the little bile left in him and felt the dry heaves take over.

"Sasuke." Itachi's voice was harder than he'd ever heard it before. His big brother had looked far older than his thirteen years in the moment before he'd been facing the floor. "There isn't time for that. I need you to listen to me." The world swam into sharp clarity for Sasuke as he forced himself to raise his head. Itachi was shaking his head, the pinwheels in his eyes whirling. "I can't do this. *Tsukuyomi*."

FMB

The quiet of the village was shattered when a blood-stained eight-year-old dashed from the Uchiha compound. "ANBU!" A figure in black materialized out of the shadows, blank-faced porcelain. "I'm to tell you that 'the branches are pruned and you need to take me to the Hokage.'" The boy made a few hand gestures as well.

The ANBU was about to move when there was a roar and a gigantic figure made of red chakra reared up, towering over the village. Its three arms flexed as one drew a sword and another slammed a giant mirror down in front of an explosion. "You!" the ANBU gestured to a passing chūnin. "Take this boy to the Hokage at the tower."

It took all of a second for the man to decide that being as far as possible from the giant was a good plan and grabbed Sasuke, throwing him over a shoulder and dashing off for the tower at the center of the village.

FMB

Sarutobi was in the process of putting on his helmet when there was a knock at his window. Since this was the tenth floor, that would normally be an oddity, but this was a ninja village and most ninja felt that doors were something that happened to other people. However, he was not expecting a terrified chūnin to drop a tiny boy on his floor. He was not expecting for that boy to be Uchiha Sasuke. And he most definitely did not expect the words that came out of the boy's mouth.

"The branches are pruned. I'm to tell you that Shimura Danzō ordered my brother to take drastic measures to prevent revolt without your authority and the attack was aided by Uchiha Madara."

There was another explosion. "Right. Hold that thought." The Hokage pointed at the chūnin. "Congratulations on your first S-rank secret. Now take him downstairs and get him some warm milk and a bed. I can deal with that after I sort out whatever is blowing up my village. Inu! I want the subject suitable for long-term storage."

FMB

It was a day for the unexpected, it seemed. The Hokage stared at the corpse of Uchiha Itachi. The boy had clearly gone well beyond his prodigious limits. One hand was clutching a crushed, bloody thing that looked like it had a pinwheel in it. Somehow, despite the wounds that some poor medic was going to have to catalogue for the official report, his ANBU captain had managed to scrawl out a few short instructions on the ground beside him in blood. It was the least he could do, since the boy had given everything for the village.

FMB

Uchiha Sasuke had his face buried in the hospital pillow. He'd been taught from the cradle that crying was a sign of weakness, but everything was just coming home to him and he couldn't help it. He hadn't cried for the first day or so afterwards. Everything had just been numb. He'd delivered his message to the Hokage and collapsed on a bed. He wasn't sure how long he had sat in silence, just staring at a wall while the scene he'd found in his house replayed over and over. He'd listened to what the people who came in said, but it was all happening to someone else.

At least he'd had three more days with his brother. He didn't know how his brother had done it, but they'd spent time for him to lose it in shock and to panic and even to shout in anger and still sit and talk. There was so much to try and remember and he knew he couldn't forget any of it if he wanted to carry out his brother's wishes. He'd never get to be better than Itachi now, but he could at least fulfill his big brother's instructions.

Now, though, it was really registering that everything was over. While they'd been in that red and black world, he'd still had his brother, so everything might still have been okay. But now his brother was dead and being honored as a hero. He had no one at all left. And so despite what his father had told him, he cried.

He didn't know how long he'd been at it when there was a sound at the doorway. Sasuke looked up to see one of his classmates, the Hyūga, poking her head in. "What do you want?" he tried to sound angry, but the sniffles cut the bite from his words.

"W... well, I heard some-someone crying." She poked her fingers together, looking at them instead of him. "C-crying al-alone is horrible and I wanted to-to see if y-you were alright."

"I'm not!" snapped Sasuke, getting a bit more feeling into the words. "My whole family is dead! Butchered by my bother!" He glared. "Why are *you* crying?"

"B-bec-cause th-that's awful!" Hinata's eyes had gone straight passed tearing and into leaking down her cheeks. "I'm so s-sorry f-f-for you!"

Her tears set him off again and he bit his lip to keep from sobbing in front of her, eyes focused on his lap to hide his eyes as they overflowed. That was why he was shocked to feel a pair of arms around him. He stiffened. "D-don't hold it in," she managed, sniffing. "Jus-just l-l-let it out; l-like p-p-poison." Then she added quietly, "I know."

What else could he do? He let it out.

FMB

"Hinata!"

The girl who'd fallen into a half-doze with him when they'd tired themselves out snapped awake. "C-coming father!" She disentangled herself from him and went to the doorway, turning to give him a quick bow. "I-I'll see y-you in cl-class?"

"I guess."

FMB

He did see her in class, but not for the three weeks he spent in the company of several ANBU and his newly appointed therapist. It was thanks to the man's advice that Sasuke's first action when he walked into the classroom was to walk directly to the back, ignoring the squealing girls and plop himself down in the chair next to Hinata. Aside from a "meep" there was no response.

"Want to come over to my place after classes?" he asked.

"Huh?" Hinata's head snapped around to face him.

"Maybe spar or train or something? My therapist says I need to spend time with people my own age. You're literally the only person

our age I know who I don't also hate." He gestured with his head to the girls who were glaring daggers at Hinata.

"I-I guess?"

"Good. My therapist said I needed to make a friend."

FMB

"Hinata?"

She looked up to see that Sasuke had settled himself into the chair next to her again. "Y-yes?"

"My therapist says I can't just tell someone they're my friend. Apparently I need to ask."

"Oh."

"He seems to know everything about how people interact, so I'm taking his word for it. He has more friends than I do, anyway. Want to be my friend?"

"I-I've never h-ha-had a f-friend b-befo-fore."

"Is that a 'yes'? I'm pretty sure he's going to want a definite, positive response here."

"Y-yes."

"That works."

FMB

"Hinata?"

"Y-" she cut herself off and took a deep breath. "Yes?" A few weeks with someone whose response to her presence wasn't contempt was

helping, he had made it clear that she needed to get over the stuttering. It happened a lot, but she was working on it.

"So, my therapist says I need to ask you if there's anything you'd like to do after school instead of just going to train."

"Oh."

"That was me asking you."

"Oh." She considered the question. "S-sometimes I p-press flowers?"

"How do you do that?"

FMB

"So here we are." Sasuke's voice was dry, but clear of actual disapproval. "In a field of flowers. Now what?"

"Well, you have to pick one."

Sasuke pointed at a random flower. "That one."

"That one?" Hinata seemed a little more confident here, in her comfort zone. "That's the one that calls to you and tells you it's the best?"

"No. It's just the one I pointed to. What makes a 'best' flower? I mean, it's not like it has any use as a weapon."

Hinata blinked. "I guess there are some with thorns?"

"I'll find one."

A few minutes later, Sasuke was holding a flower that had a few small thorns on its stem. "This was the most weaponized one I could find. What next?"

Hinata produced a pair of books, offering one to him. "Place the flower in the book," she instructed as she did so with the bloom she had selected, waiting for him to do the same. "Now you close the book."

"Okay?"

"Now you wait for it to dry out."

Sasuke stared at the two journals. "Why?"

"Well, they're easier to store that way and it preserves them so you can look at them again after they would normally have rotted."

"Oh." Sasuke continued to stare at the journals. "Well, that seems to have taken only a short period of time. Want to go train?"

Hinata shrugged. "Sure."

FMB

Sasuke sat next to Hinata. "Good morning, Hinata." His therapist had told him that proper greetings were important and Hinata seemed to enjoy them. He didn't understand it, but he knew Yamanaka-san had a far better grasp on human interaction than him, so he assumed the man knew what he was talking about. "I've been talking to my therapist."

"You do that every day, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yamanaka-san has been letting our sessions get shorter, but he wants to see me daily still. Anyway, I was wondering if we can go straight to training after school today or if you're going to go on stealth-training again."

Hinata meeped, a sound she had almost completely removed from her library of vocal noises over the last six months. "St-st-stealth t-training?" she squeaked. Her stutter had made great strides as well, but had now emerged again.

"Well, I figured that must be what it is. I thought it was a good idea, so I did it too one day, followed you the whole time. You need to work on spotting tails."

"Meep!"

"It's got to be stealth training, right? Because Yamanaka-san says that what you were doing was stalking otherwise and that's bad."

Hinata's face was bright red. "And he says that only one friend is great, but that I need to expand my circle of acquaintances among our 'cohort'-his word-beyond one. So this'll kill two genin with one kunai. HEY NARUTO! C'MERE!"

"MEEP!"

The blond tromped over. "Whatever it is, I didn't do it!"

"I'm sure you did, Naruto, but I was more thinking that you should come with me and Hinata after school for training."

"I don't want to be the punching-bag again."

"That's what training is for."

"The last time someone asked me to taijutsu training, I got hit a lot."

Sasuke looked at Hinata. "That sounds like taijutsu training to me."

"And I wasn't allowed to hit them."

Another look. "Yep. Sounds like taijutsu training." The Uchiha had believed in tough... something. Yamanaka-san said he hated to speak ill of the dead, but that his kin had not been providing a loving or nurturing home environment.

"I mean they said I wasn't allowed to hit them."

"Oh." A third look. "No, that's not taijutsu training."

"Is that what's going to happen today?"

"Have you miraculously become competent at taijutsu since yesterday?"

"Hey!"

"Seriously, never mind the execution, your form is atrocious."

"I use the same style as the two of you!"

"I doubt it. Hinata uses her family's style to take advantage of their ability to see chakra networks and I use what I learned of the Uchiha Interceptor style, which will work a lot better for me once I unlock my Sharingan. But you don't even have the Academy style right."

"Yes I do!"

"We'll see."

FMB

"Oi, Naruto!"

"What?"

"Why're you sitting over there?"

Naruto gave Sasuke a look that seemed to say 'where else would I sit?'

"You sit with us!"

Naruto trotted over. "Oh. Okay."

"How are you not tired?" demanded Sasuke. He and Hinata sported bruises and signs of fatigue. "We went way too late last night."

Naruto shrugged. "I don't get tired." He also lacked any of the bruising they were showing.

FMB

"Good afternoon, Yamanaka-san."

Inoichi sat back in his chair and looked over his charge. The boy had made great strides over the last six months or so. There weren't just rough edges left, but some seriously jagged bits, but it was a vast improvement. He'd been considering letting the number of sessions drop a bit, but Sasuke seemed to be responding well to having someone to check in with on how human interactions worked. Thankfully, the boy didn't show signs of sociopathy, just a complete lack of any foundational knowledge. "How are you doing, Sasuke-kun?"

"Pretty good. I think I cleared a couple of objectives yesterday."

There was also the fact that he tended to think of any goal as an objective, but that wasn't too odd for a ninja. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I fixed Hinata's stalking, made a new friend, and did a good deed all at once."

"Good, good..."

"Yeah. I made Naruto come train with us."

And Inoichi realized he had spoken too soon.

FMB

"Hey, Naruto?"

"Yeah?" the blond hadn't needed to be told to come over and sit with Sasuke and Hinata. It was probably only that Sasuke was acting as a barrier that kept Hinata down to minor blushing.

"So, I was talking with my therapist and he says that I forgot how the whole friendship thing works. I'm supposed to ask you if you want to be friends." He paused and realized that apparently the question embedded in his words had been missed. "Do you want to be friends with me and..." he paused and felt very proud of himself. "Hinata, do you want Naruto to be your friend also?" At the frantic nod, he smiled. "... and Hinata?"

Naruto's eyes teared up. "I've never had a friend before."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"You seem to be collecting us, Sasuke-kun," murmured Hinata as Naruto tackled the boy in a brutal hug while chanting 'yes!' over and over.

FMB

"Naruto, I've been meaning to ask: where's your after-training meal?"

"My what?"

"You burn a lot of calories training. You more than either of us. I don't see you eating during school, so you really need to eat after training."

"Ch." Naruto scoffed and shook his head. "Like I can afford two meals a day."

Sasuke glanced at Hinata's determined face and shook his head slightly.

FMB

"Yamanaka-san?"

They'd scaled back the meetings and Inoichi felt pretty good about it, despite the occasional setbacks. Sasuke had come a long way from when they had started. The presence of a second friend-a second

person who looked to him for guidance-had done wonders for drawing him at least a bit further out of his shell.

"I was wondering... would it be right of me to give Naruto some money for food?"

Inoichi's eyes narrowed. His instinctive reaction was that someone was trying to take advantage of his patient, but while Sasuke might still struggle with how to appropriately interact with others, his struggles were almost invariably in opening up, not being too open. "Why do you ask? Did he ask you for money?"

"No. But when I asked him about having food after training, he said he couldn't afford two meals a day. I'm pretty sure that's not healthy, Yamanaka-san."

This was unexpected. "A good question, Sasuke. Let me think about it. Stop by my office tomorrow and I'll let you know."

(A/N John)

So here's one of the things we've been working on. Life's gotten busy for us recently and Spoon's been ill, so we've had less writing time. I should have more time to write in a couple weeks. We'll see if that translates to faster updates.

(A/N 2 John)

Sasuke knows Itachi killed everyone, but officially, it was the Masked Man. Just want to be clear here. Be in the habit of reading these. It's not just a diary. This is where you'll find information on what's likely getting published next and any major changes to plot that we've made outside of the apparent.

In Which Canon Goes Slightly Awry

Chapter 2: In Which Canon Goes Slightly Awry

Inoichi slipped into the shadows, observing the lax attitude of the ANBU in the area as he followed Naruto. It had taken a bit of work to explain the difference between stalking and ninja-like behavior, but Sasuke had finally grasped the basics of it. (The advanced version was 'because I'm the one doing it'.) He'd prefer a larger sample-size, but he'd have to make do with this.

FMB

"So, Sasuke, I think I have an answer for you. Maybe you should have Naruto just have a meal with you?"

"That... sounds like a terrible idea."

"Really? You seemed concerned about his health..."

"I am. But have you seen a room after he goes through it? I like my house standing, Yamanaka-san."

"Sasuke..."

"Yes, Yamanaka-san?"

"You have a whole training field."

Sasuke actually colored a little. "Right. Thanks, Yamanaka-san!"

FMB

"Where're you going, Naruto?"

"Leaving?" Naruto cocked his head. "We're done training for the day, right?"

"Yeah. Come over here." Sasuke sat beside Hinata and a picnic basket. "I have extra."

"I'm good."

"Naruto..." Sasuke sighed. "Whatever excuse you're thinking, I don't care. Come here and eat. It's not healthy to be on one meal a day. I have plenty of food; eat."

FMB

A ten-year-old Sasuke was relaxing in his chair beside Naruto. They were both waiting for class to begin, although Naruto was, no doubt, mostly thinking about other things. The fangirls were camped around their little swathe of peace at the back of the room, glaring daggers at the corner seat where Hinata usually sat. At the moment, she was running late.

When the door opened, Sasuke's eyes widened and then narrowed; beside him, there was a low growled string of curses from Naruto.

FMB

Sarutobi Hiruzen looked up to see his secretary poking her head into his office. "Uchiha Sasuke is here and insisting he have a meeting with you."

"Isn't it the middle of the school day?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

"Send him in."

Sasuke prowled into the office, his face set like thunder. Without any preamble, he uttered a series of words that were on the list of things the Hokage had never expected to hear: "Umino Iruka is permitting the abuse of one of his students."

"You're serious?"

"Yes."

"I see." Sarutobi made a discrete gesture and a shadow detached itself from the wall. Fifteen minutes later, a rather worried-looking Iruka was hustled into the office.

"You wished to see me, Hokage-sama?"

"Indeed. I'm told you're allowing a student to be abused at home?"

"I'm *what*, Hokage-sama?" Iruka's face screwed up in a mix of offense and confusion.

"Hinata came in with bruises on her face, Umino-san," spat Sasuke. "And you didn't even respond."

"Yes. I met with her before class and she told me it was from a spar at home."

"And you believed her?"

"Well yes. She said she'd managed to hit her sister and so she had a spar with her father and that's where the bruise came from."

"Hn."

FMB

"Hokage-sama." An ANBU member climbed in through the window and deposited a bound and gagged Uchiha Sasuke on the floor.

"What is this?"

"We caught him attempting the assassination of Hyūga Hiashi."

"You what." Sarutobi rubbed his eyes, trying to stay awake enough to deal with whatever insanity had managed to take hold of the world.

"Well, technically we caught him trying to break into the compound, but when we asked him what he was doing he said, and I quote, 'I'm going to kill that child abusing freak, Hiashi!'"

"I see."

FMB

Yamanaka Inoichi was escorted through the window. He was scowling and trying to rub sleep from his eyes. "Hokage-sama," he managed to not actually sound angry at having been awakened at three in the morning. This was eased somewhat by the fact that the Hokage was sitting at his kitchen table with his hat on, but wearing his bedclothes. Inoichi felt better about suffering when someone else was as well. A quick glance took in the glaring face of a boy who was still effectively his patient after several years. "What did Sasuke do?"

"Attempted to kill Hiashi."

Inoichi sighed. "Sasuke... what did I tell you about trying to kill Hiashi?"

"But he's abusing Hinata!"

"It was a training incident."

" *Sure* it was. That's just what she's telling everyone because she's too embarrassed to admit it!"

"You've been reading my psychology books while waiting for our sessions again, haven't you?"

"I get bored!"

"Look, Sasuke. I've spoken to Hinata. I've spoken to Hiashi. I've even spoken to Hanabi. You trust me in matters of social interaction, right?"

"Yeah. I don't like where this is going, though."

"It was a training accident. Hinata managed to hit Hanabi yesterday in training, so her father took over as her sparring partner. From what I gather, he might have been a bit rougher than necessary because Hinata had managed to strike her sister using the Interceptor style."

"Makes sense. It's better than the Jūken, after all."

Inoichi ignored the remark. "So you need to understand that you're not to kill Hiashi."

"I have to wait until I get stronger, got it."

Inoichi closed his eyes and then tried again. "No. I'm going to monitor the situation personally. If I think there's ever a sign that Hinata is actually being abused, I'll tell you."

"Right. I'm not to kill him until you tell me to."

Inoichi looked over at the Hokage, who was clearly using his folded hands to conceal a smirk. "Close enough."

FMB

Naruto frowned to himself as the trio sat in the Uchiha hot spring. "Guys, we've got a month until graduation and we still haven't sorted out that little problem of mine. The chakra exercises aren't working."

Hinata patted Naruto on the shoulder. "I'm sure we'll find a way."

"I *have* been looking through the clan library," Sasuke said after a moment. "Some idiot decided that only those with the Sharingan should be able to use it, so the whole thing is layered with genjutsu and is completely disorganized. But I finally found a couple of bunshin options."

"Yeah?" Naruto's grin turned hungry.

"Yep. All the elemental versions. Well, except wind. Only a couple wind techniques in the whole of the library anyway. And lightning and

fire are out, because they just shape the element into a form. But there're water and mud clones."

"You think I can learn those?"

"Maybe. It depends on your affinity."

"Affinity?"

Sasuke and Hinata both sighed. "To figure it out," Sasuke went on, deciding to ignore the evidence that Naruto *still* didn't pay attention in class, "we'd need chakra paper. And that's illegal to sell to people under chunin rank."

Hinata blinked. "I'll be right back." She rose and grabbed a towel to dry off as she walked out of the spring area.

FMB

She returned half an hour later and slipped back into the water, carefully keeping her left hand above the liquid. "Three chakra paper slips."

"Where did you get that?" Sasuke asked.

"My family keeps some around."

"They didn't mind you borrowing it?"

"Sasuke, you can't borrow chakra paper."

"Did they mind you taking it?"

"No idea; I didn't ask." Hinata shrugged and offered him a piece.

"We already know I'm fire. I'm an Uchiha."

"Well, show us how it's done then," Hinata said mildly.

"Fine." Sasuke took the paper and held it flat on his palm. "If I were wind, it would cut; if I were earth, it'd crumble; if I were water, it would soak through; if I were lightening, it would crinkle up into a ball. Since I'm fire, it will burst into-" as he spoke the paper folded itself up into a tightly wadded ball. "-flame. That shouldn't be possible. Uchiha are fire aligned!"

"Maybe your mother had an affair?" Naruto suggested.

"That cheating whore!"

"Sasuke, was your father a nice man?" Hinata asked.

"Not really, no."

"Then maybe it makes sense that she wouldn't want to have a child with him?"

"But if she had, maybe I'd be as good as Itachi was!"

Naruto raised a finger. "But why would you assume that your mother had any child with your father?"

"That dirty, cheating whore!"

Hinata shook her head, smiling slightly. "Well, I'm probably earth, like my fam-" she trailed off as the paper became soaked.

"Water, then?" said Sasuke. "Your mother was a cheating whore, too?"

Hinata sighed. "Water crops up in our family a now and again."

"My turn! My turn!" Naruto held out his hand and frowned in concentration. Nothing happened. Then, suddenly, the paper burst apart into a fine cloud that blew from his palm into the water.

"So was that wind or earth?" Sasuke murmured.

"No idea." Hinata glanced at Naruto and a faint blush flared on her cheeks. "But it was seriously powerful."

Sasuke sighed. Hinata had made great strides over the years in her shyness. The rest of the world was still treated to the timid girl she would have been, but he and Naruto were privy to a somewhat sardonic and sometimes assertive personality-and then there would be times when her interest in Naruto would make itself known (not that Naruto had ever picked up on it). At least she almost never blushed anymore. Soaks after training had pretty much dealt with that.

"I guess the easiest way to find out would be to use some simple techniques?" he offered.

Naruto beamed. "Learning new jutsu? Cool! Let's go!" He sprang from the pool of water.

Sasuke sighed again.

FMB

"So I've got here a mud-bullet technique and a technique firing air bullets."

"May as well start with the earth one," Naruto said. "If that's the one, I've got a clone technique sorted out." He picked up the scroll and skimmed it a few times. He slowly made the four seals required, murmuring to himself. "Ready!" The two stared as Naruto turned to face the target dummies and his hands flew through the seals. The ground around him liquified and then rose up in a rapid stream of chunks that blasted apart a half-dozen trees.

"Looks like earth is the one, huh?" said Sasuke, once his mouth had started working again. He looked at his friend, who was rubbing the back of his head sheepishly and staring at the damage he'd wrought. Hinata stammered something, but didn't get further than that, apparently having some trouble taking in the devastation. Her eyes

flashed as they activated, examining what had happened. "I'll go get the mud-clone scroll..." Sasuke trailed off as he watched Naruto trot over to the other scroll on the ground. "What are you doing?"

"No reason not to learn this one, too, right?" Naruto was already reading through the scroll and mumbling to himself, hands shifting about. "Right!" His hands moved in a blur again and then there was a deafening bang as a meter-wide cylinder vanished from the trees and the outer wall of the compound behind them. There was cursing from the chūnin who'd been bodily lifted and buried under the rubble of the building he'd struck.

Sasuke's mouth took over while his brain was busy gibbering. "Naruto, inside the house."

Naruto trotted away. Years of friendship with the Uchiha had taught him that the boy was often looking out for him, wanted or not. Thanks to Sasuke, Naruto had been properly fed for the past four years and that was only the start, as far as Naruto was concerned. If Sasuke told him to get inside, there was a good reason.

A moment later, Sasuke had recovered enough to make an expression he knew Hinata would see with her eyes active. He schooled his face into an expression of shocked horror-something that was only slightly faked-as Hinata went over to the pile of debris and began apologizing for Sasuke's accidental attack while practicing a new technique.

FMB

Sasuke opened the door and blinked. "Er... Hokage-sama."

"Uchiha Sasuke." The man's voice was kindly. "May I come in? Good." He brushed passed the boy and into the sitting room. "Would you tell Naruto to come out, please?" Before Sasuke could speak, an orange and yellow blur of motion appeared from the shadows and began to bounce. "Ah. Good." The Hokage sat himself down and motioned for the boys to do the same. "Hyūga-san," he said politely

to Hinata, who gave him a measured bow. "So. Who wants to tell me what happened this afternoon?"

"Well, Hokage-sama," Sasuke began. "We were considering a problem that Naruto has. You see, he can't manage a bunshin. Not a one..."

"And it's quite close to graduation, yes. Though I wonder, Naruto, why didn't you come to me?"

"Huh?"

"You come to me with every problem you have, lad. I grant that number has gone down, thanks to your friendship with these two, but since when have you not thought of me for help?"

Naruto looked mystified. "I don't know."

"Well, we'll return to that later, then." The Hokage turned back to Sasuke. "Continue."

"We figured that since I'd finally found some clone moves in the family library, that maybe he could learn one of the elemental ones to get by instead. To do that, though, we wanted to know what Naruto's chakra nature is. I got out a few scrolls of basic techniques and he used them to test what affinity he has."

"I see. Lad, I'm going to do you a huge favor and tell you a secret: I've been Hokage longer than you've been alive. I've gotten good not only at noticing lies, but spotting when someone has left out huge parts of the story. Since I'm being nice, I'll let you try again."

"Uh... well, I mostly left out the part where we tried to figure out Naruto's nature with chakra paper."

"Chakra paper."

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

"The chakra paper that's illegal to sell to genin?"

"Thankfully, we're not genin."

"The chakra paper that's illegal to sell to those under chūnin, then."

"Since we didn't buy."

"The chakra paper that is illegal to possess under the rank of chūnin?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

"I see. And how did you get this chakra paper?"

Sasuke glanced at Hinata. "Uh..."

"Your family gave you chakra paper?" the Hokage asked.

"They provided it without objection, yes, Hokage-sama." Hinata's face was a serene picture of innocence.

"Your father is proud of your progress in political training, is he?"

"We don't discuss it much, Hokage-sama."

"Alright. So then what."

"Sasuke was demonstrating how it worked," Hinata chipped in. "He was telling us what the response it would have based on each element and as he said 'and if it's fire, like me,' it crinkled up."

"Cheating whore," muttered Sasuke.

"And he is now convinced that his mother had an affair as the explanation for his affinity. Naruto and I think that would have been a perfectly rational action and she should be blameless, but Sasuke disagrees. I digress. I was expecting to be earth, but the paper soaked through."

"And Naruto?"

"That's where the trouble started," Hinata admitted.

"My paper just kinda turned into little bits and blew away."

"Right," Sasuke picked up the thread. "And we weren't sure if that meant crumbling for earth or just confetti showing wind. So we decided to do a practical test. I gave him an earth scroll and he fired a bunch of earth bullets at the training dummies. We figured that meant earth..."

"And how does this lead to the mess outside your compound?"

"Naruto decided to learn the wind technique anyway. There was a bang and a bunch of my property vanished, along with part of my outer wall."

"And the reason everyone blames you?"

"I had Hinata blame me to the chūnin and got Naruto out of sight. No one will be too put out about me doing this, but they'd have a fit if he did."

"Yep. And while you were busy telling everyone how great you are, I learned the mud clone!"

"We seem to be lasting!" chipped in another Naruto, who had wandered into the room and settled himself on the arm of a couch.

"And we're out of ramen," added a third Naruto, walking in with a steaming bowl.

Naruto (the one presumed to be the original) sighed. "That supply was supposed to last a month! Sasuke doesn't let me buy more than that!" He smashed his fist down on the clone's head. It burst apart.

"Naruto, could you not do that inside? It'll take forever to get the mud out now."

"I'll go make tea," Hinata rose and left the room.

"Things seem to be under control," the Hokage said.

"Yeah, pretty much. Though I need to plant a bunch of trees and hire some earth-user to rebuild my wall. I'll file the missions in the morning."

"Well, between you and Naruto, there are enough ANBU observing you that I think you'll be alright for the evening."

"Probably, Hokage-sama."

"Naruto, the next time you have a problem like this, just come to me?"

"Alright," said a dozen blonds.

FMB

"GUYS!"

Sasuke glared at his best friend once he'd managed to catch all the falling cookware he'd dropped while reaching for kunai when his friend had burst into the room shouting. "What the hell, Naruto?"

"You know how Mizuki wanted me to stay late after we graduated?"

"Yeah. It worked out, because I got a chance to finish cooking our celebratory feast. Hinata is... borrowing... some of her family's best tea."

"Never mind that! Mizuki said that I did so well, learning the alternate clone and everything, that I'm being given an extra test that can be used for credit towards making chūnin!"

Sasuke blinked while he ran that through his head. "A special test for credit towards chūnin?"

"Yep!"

"What is this test?"

"It's an infiltration exercise. Break into the Hokage Tower after dark, acquire the scroll planted for the mission, exfiltrate, and meet at the extraction point."

"Break into the Hokage Tower?"

"Uh-huh."

"This doesn't sound good."

"It's great! We'll get promoted early for sure!"

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"You and Hinata are coming with me!"

"I'm still suspicious."

"Come on, Sasuke, what's the worst that could happen?"

FMB

Sasuke felt himself grow faint when the giant kunai slammed into Umino Iruka's back with a dull thud. The world streamed into focus, bright and clear suddenly as Hinata gasped and Naruto began to curse at the white-haired man up in the trees.

"Don't you wonder why everyone hates you, brat?" he was saying, laughing as Iruka tried to rise. "Haven't you ever asked what you did? You destroyed the village!"

"I what?"

"You're the demon fox, brat! That's the secret!"

"I..." Naruto's face was falling.

"Bullshit!" Sasuke barely recognized his own voice. It seemed to be coming from a great ways away. "He's Uzumaki Naruto!" Beside him, Hinata put her hand on Naruto's shoulder, her eyes flaring into life as she stared up at the man with an expression of hatred turning her normally kind face into a mask of dark fury. "And you're not getting away with this!"

"What are a couple of brats like you going to do, fox-lover? I'll kill you kids before I do in the demon!" Mizuki's contempt lasted about as long as it took for the forest to vanish in a sea of orange and yellow.

"Kill you." Sasuke spat a fireball at the tree and then dove into the clone horde, dodging between them with greater ease than he expected, tracking Mizuki's path through the trees and following it with a fireball whenever the man seemed to be getting too comfortable.

Mizuki dropped to the forest floor, hoping to disappear into the underbrush as the waves of clones charged at him, Uchiha Sasuke weaving through the crowd and coming at him with murder on his face. The brats had been beating the hell out of him for twenty minutes and even though he was killing clones by the score, there was a limit to his endurance and the two kids didn't seem to be slowing down. Two? Mizuki pitched forwards as Hinata lowered her hand.

The boys stared at her. She shrugged. "You were taking too long." A pause. "Congratulations, Sasuke."

"What for?" Hinata tapped the bulging veins on her face. "Oh? Oh! Cool!"

"We should do something about Iruka-sensei." Naruto was crouched beside the man, looking jittery but not panicking yet. "I can't remember, do we take the weapon out or leave it in?" He looked up

at Hinata and Sasuke when they came over to stand next to him.
"We can't let him die. He saved us!"

"I think," said the lion-masked ANBU behind him, "that you have bigger concerns." A second ANBU sporting a stylized bear on her mask seized the scroll out of Naruto's hands, while a third with the stripes of a hunting cat knelt and started healing the injured chūnin. "The Hokage wishes to speak with you."

Sasuke summed up the situation perfectly: "shit."

(A/N John)

Surprise! We're publishing again already! I have a good chunk of *For My Brother* already written, it's mostly a feel-good story (excepting the moments of serious darkness) and so I like writing it in the winter when everything is a bit grim.

(A/N 2 John)

On the other hand, *Borderlands 2* has been taking its toll on us. We've been enjoying laying waste to hordes of monsters and freaks with a variety of snooty objects and slushy things.

(A/N 3 John)

I do believe that next chapter will have some of the great moments as far as I am concerned. I truly enjoy the way I've written Kakashi for this fic.

John Didn't Title This

Chapter 3: John Didn't Title This

"Nice of you to join me," said the Hokage, his smile clearly forced. "I'm so glad to be awake at two in the morning because some not-even-genin broke into my tower and stole the Forbidden Scroll."

"Y-y-that was the *real* Forbidden Scoll?" squeaked Sasuke. Beside him, Hinata was covering her face with her hands and mumbling about her father.

"But this was a graduation exercise!" Naruto insisted.

"Naruto," Sasuke sighed. "Mizuki lied."

"Oh." Naruto looked down. Then he perked up. "But we stole the Forbidden Scroll, that *has* to be noteworthy enough to help us get promoted to chūnin!"

The Hokage's mouth dropped open. " *That* was what this was about?" He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Breaking into the Tower is... not really the kind of thing you want on your record, Naruto."

"But we managed to steal something important, right? Isn't that good enough?"

Sarutobi looked at Sasuke.

"We *stole* something really important," the boy explained. "That's grounds for us to get into trouble, not rewarded!"

"Indeed. I understand the team assignments are tomorrow."

Sasuke frowned. "I realize that this might not be the best circumstances to bring this up, but... I think I should be on a team with Hinata and Naruto." When the Hokage opened his mouth,

Sasuke hurried to continue. "I know our grades mean that it'd be messy to group us together, but I don't really like people, but I like them, so that means there's a better chance that we can work as a team, besides, I've been training with them for years and we spend pretty much all our time together so I insist that it would be the best choice."

The Hokage considered this. "You make some fair points. Alright, you've convinced me. Now, I've asked one of my jōnin to come by and give you three a personal lesson as a... reward for breaking into the tower and waking me up early in the morning."

"YOUTH!"

FMB

Yamanaka Inoichi tiredly made his way into the Hokage's office. "Hokage-sama?" he managed. He was a ninja, yes, but his assignment to T&I meant that he normally got to sleep late. And he'd been up late drinking and celebrating the graduation of his daughter with his best friends.

"Do you know who I just had in my office?" the Hokage asked, his voice far too cheerful. "Uchiha Sasuke. Along with Hyūga Hinata and Uzumaki Naruto. The three of them-well, Naruto, really-got it into their heads that if they stole the Forbidden Scroll, it would put them on the fast track to chūnin."

Inoichi blinked several times. "I think I'm still drunk, Hokage-sama. I thought you just said that my patient and his best-only-friends tried to steal the Forbidden Scroll."

"No, no, no, Inoichi." The Hokage watched the blond relax. "They *succeeded* ." There was a certain satisfaction in watching the man collapse into the uncomfortable chair kept for visitors so people wouldn't stick around too long.

"As serious as this is, I'm not entirely clear why I'm here... unless you wish a psychological profile of someone? Because I wouldn't feel comfortable interrogating my patient..."

"You misunderstand. I know why they did it. A chūnin convinced Naruto that this was a training exercise which would be credited towards promotion. From what I gather, he insisted on dragging his best friends along because they should get the benefit also. I wasn't going to have you torture them or anything. But since your patient has forced me to be awake, I'm going to spread around the misery. They're being rewarded with a training session administered by Gai."

Inoichi winced. "That seems a bit harsh."

"It's to their benefit, really."

FMB

Despite a serious injury, Umino Iruka was present bright and early for graduation day. In the six years he'd been an instructor, he'd not missed this event, he'd be damned if he missed it his first year as Head Instructor. Of course, given his wounds, he was in a wheelchair and slightly high on painkillers, but needs must.

His students filed in. He was proud of all of them, even the ones who'd failed. Well, almost all of them. There were a couple who just didn't put the effort in and he couldn't regret their failures. Most of those who hadn't passed the graduation exams were already on the fast track for mid-ranking positions in the Daimyo's army-someone who didn't make the cut for genin had still gone through years of Academy training and succeeded in passing the end-of-year exams each time. Compared to a peasant soldier, even the Academy's rejects were leagues better. Outside of the Land of Iron, there were few regulars who could stand up to a civilian who'd made it to the final year of the Academy.

He smiled at each student, waving off their questions about the wheelchair for the moment so he didn't have to explain more than

once. It amused him to see several of the teams gravitating towards one another already. Ino-Shika-Cho had pretty much always been a given and the three of them were already rather close, or as close as a bossy twelve-year-old girl could be with a lazy boy and a gluttonous boy. Still, Iruka knew they were friends. Kiba and Shino weren't really friends, or even acquaintances, but the two of them acknowledged one another as capable in his own way. Ojiro, Toman, and Nami were closer than might otherwise be the case as some of the only civilians who had been looking like they would make the cut since halfway through the year. The three were also moderately close with Sakura, who occupied a strange limbo by being friends with at least one ninja-related student, but being civilian-born herself.

Iruka didn't like playing favorites, but he had a soft spot for Naruto. Since he had realized that the boy was too good-natured to be the beast that had caused his pain, he'd known that the boy was able to do something amazing. Iruka had hated the fox. He still did, but all he saw when he looked at Naruto was a cheerful ball of sunshine determined to show the world he was worthy of respect. The boy had been good for Sasuke and Hinata, too and they him. They weren't here already, which was surprising. All three of them tended to be punctual, though for different reasons: Hinata because that was what was what she was supposed to do, Sasuke because being on time was part of being the best, and Naruto because he rarely slept enough to be late.

"Good morning," he used the coveted skill developed by teachers and parents to be heard suddenly. "I'm sure you are all wondering why-" he broke off when the door slammed open. Naruto bounded into the room, bounced in place a few times and then ran to his usual seat. Moments later, Sasuke and Hinata dragged themselves through the door, both looking like they hadn't slept at all-Iruka supposed that being debriefed after stealing the Forbidden Scroll probably took a while-and as though they had run through a bramble patch. "As I was saying," he went on when the three were all seated. "I was injured last night protecting three foolish, young people from a traitor. I will be making a full recovery in time to ensure that next

year's classes are all worked to the bone, same as you, so do not feel jealous of them. If anything, I realize that my training is insufficient and that if I need to improve, so do my students. Lucky for you that you've already passed.

"The teams..."

FMB

"Where is our sensei?" growled Sasuke. He had his head flat on the desk and was struggling to stay awake, powering through exhaustion on sheer anger at the moment. "We were told 'shortly' two hours ago."

Hinata shrugged and lay down across the desks. "I'm going to nap."

Sasuke considered this for a moment and then decided that this was a good course of action.

Naruto sighed. He hated having nothing to do. Well, he might as well put some of the ideas he'd had while running last night into practice.

FMB

"Hello my cute lit-" Hatake Kakashi swayed backwards out of the window, feet stuck to the wall, as paint, chalkboard erasers, two kunai, and a startled cat were flung through the space he had occupied a moment ago. He frowned when a glob of paint failed to have as much forward velocity and dropped down onto his flak jacket. Well then. He swung back up. "Roof. Now." He'd be calmer by the time they got out of the trick house they were locked inside.

"Naruto." Sasuke's voice was flat. "How much of the room did you trap?"

"Well... I had a couple of hours and I was bored... and I had the time to go to the hardware store and there was a stray wandering around-"

"Did you use a cat in a trap again?"

"They're demon creatures!" Naruto insisted. "Anyway, I think that there's about an inch of clearance around the two of you. I'm glad I trapped the window. I'd feel silly if our sensei had come through it and there hadn't been any traps aimed there. We're supposed to meet him on the roof."

With an energy that the other two never had, even when well rested, he clambered out the window and began to monkey his way up the Academy along drainpipes and handholds that were not supposed to be there until he'd made them himself.

FMB

Kakashi was mildly impressed that his new genin-and no matter what he wanted, he wasn't going to get to fail this trio-were not covered in paint, tar, feathers, and whatever else Naruto had found lying around.

"Let's get to know one another."

"We know each other rather well, thanks," Sasuke said. He was not feeling kindly disposed to someone who'd been this late, even if it had meant he got a nap.

"Fine then. Tell me about yourselves. Likes, dislikes, dreams, goals."

"Could you demonstrate, sensei?" Hinata's expression was completely innocent and Kakashi struggled to find a hint of anything else in it.

"Sure. I like lots of things and dislike even more things; I have no dreams, only nightmares, and my goal is to take life one day at a time."

Sasuke frowned. "You know, if you're having trouble with nightmares and stuff, I know someone you should talk to."

"Yeah, yeah. Your turn."

"I like my friends, training, and tomatoes. I dislike ramen more than one night a week, Hyūga Hiashi, and anyone else who abuses my friends. My dream and goal are the same: the restoration of my clan to a point we can fulfill our duties once more."

"Me next!" Naruto was bouncing in place. "I like my friends, and Jiji, and ramen, and training... I dislike people who are mean to me. I dream of having a big family and my goal is to be Hokage because that means I'll have earned the respect of the village!"

Kakashi blinked. It didn't escape his notice that Hinata had a faint blush on her cheeks and slightly silly smile on her lips. He also noted that Naruto's goal was far more clearly thought out than he'd been fearing.

"I like my friends, training, and our hotspring-"

" *Our ?*" Sasuke hissed.

"Hush. I even like my family. I dislike when my family is mean to me and people who are mean to my friends. I dream... I dream that I'll be able to live my life happily despite my duties to the clan and my goal is to abolish the caged-bird seal when I become the new head of the clan."

"Before I continue with anything further: why do you both have your bloodlines active?"

"Building stamina, sensei," replied Hinata. "Strengthens our reserves and reduces the strain of use during battle."

"Besides, Naruto has so much energy that if we felt the drain in a fight, he'd just win through attrition if we don't seriously injure him."

"I see." Kakashi shrugged. "Well... I guess I should tell you that you're not genin yet." He waited for their outrage and instead was

faced with calm looks (even Naruto, who was practically vibrating). "But I'm not going to do that. I've read the team recommendation from the Hokage. Testing your teamwork would be a waste of my time. Report to Training Ground Seven tomorrow morning, one hour after dawn. We will start our day with light training and then see about some missions."

The three watched the jōnin form a quick handseal and vanish in a cloud of leaves.

"So... training?" Naruto asked. He was met with death glares from his friends. "What?"

FMB

The trio glared at the empty training field. "Somehow I'm not surprised," Sasuke grumbled. There was a distinct lack of sensei in the area.

"Training anyway?" Naruto suggested. "I mean, he said we'd be training."

FMB

Some distance away, Hatake Kakashi was settled on the roof of the Hokage Tower with a telescope, having shoved the ANBU who'd tried to move him off the edge. As tempted as he was to emulate his great role model and look at the baths, he was business-first. He observed as his cute little genin quickly realized he wasn't showing up and began to train themselves. It was nice to see that they seemed to be focusing on weaknesses. The Uchiha and Hyūga were spending much of their time consulting scrolls and then running through handsigns and throwing techniques at their teammate, who was apparently unaware for the most part. Kakashi's eyes bulged when he watched a thirteen-year-old run through the handsigns for the Wind Bullet at a speed far beyond what he expected for a genin and fired off a blast that leveled trees for fifty yards. Someone hadn't prepared a full dossier, it seemed.

Two mud clones formed beside him and glided down the sides of the tower before jogging towards the training field. It was earlier than he planned to show up, but there was no reason he shouldn't learn a few things. She hid it well, but the Hyūga twitched just a little when his clones entered her range. Shinobi tended to be good at practical maths and he did some quick figuring to work out how far she could see before letting the clones dispel. He was feeling the drain of letting Obito's eye remain uncovered, but he'd be damned if his students were able to do that and he couldn't.

Well, he had plenty of time to visit the memorial stone before he trained them.

FMB

Kakashi strolled onto the training field to quiet glares from his students, who were currently eating their lunches. "Good initiative, training without orders," he commented. Four mud clones rose at the edges of the clearing. One of them held a white handkerchief. That one dashed to the three students.

"Protect the flag!" Kakashi snapped in his third-best 'Jōnin-command' voice. He watched with bemusement as Naruto grabbed the flag from the clone's hand and dashed off into the forest. "I think I may have phrased that badly."

"Probably," said Hinata. "Naruto tends to take an unusual view of things. And protecting an object *is* a valid mission objective, sensei."

"Good luck," offered Sasuke. "He normally outruns squads of ANBU after pranking them."

Kakashi frowned behind his mask. "It seems ANBU has been getting slack. As you noted, however, this accidental interpretation *is* a possible mission objective." Two mud clones were suddenly behind the pair, quick chops to their necks sending them to the ground, stunned. "And that means you're supposed to back up your teammate." Kakashi vanished in a cloud of leaves.

FMB

Half an hour later, Kakashi walked into the clearing with a grumbling Naruto held up by the collar. "Good run, that," he said cheerfully as he gave a hidden smile at the pair of genin who were tied to trees, guarded by a mud clone.

"Shame you didn't get him, sensei," said Hinata, moments before Naruto collapsed into a pile of mud.

"It is, isn't it?" replied Kakashi before he burst into smoke.

Ten minutes later, Kakashi came back into the clearing, one hand holding the white flag and dragging a struggling Naruto along. The genin had refused to let go of the flag and so was being towed behind his sensei while swearing a blue streak.

"Now, while this was an amusing little incident. I do believe that it highlights a failure in your dynamic." Kakashi tossed Naruto onto the ground in front of his teammates. "Or maybe it's just that you don't take things seriously. I'm dispensing with the usual training for the most part. You three are doing plenty of self-study, but we're going to work on the hard part of ninja-work: the job." Kakashi realized that he'd quickly slipped back into ANBU-mode, training a bunch of new recruits. "Now, we're going on a nice jog around the village five times and then we work on makeup."

"Makeup?"

"Infiltration of a ninja village takes more than a henge."

"I know how to do makeup!" Naruto chirped. "The nice ladies near my old apartment taught me!"

Kakashi blinked slowly.

FMB

Naruto bounced into the Uchiha compound, happy to be doing something other than sitting still. Their sensei was evil: he'd made them sit in a cafe the entire afternoon, just watching people and trying to identify as much as possible about them.

Sasuke and Hinata shook their heads as they followed the blond. Neither of them had expected their sensei to be anything like what they'd got. Between makeup, costuming, and people-watching, they hadn't been studying the combat they'd hoped for. On the other hand, the man seemed to be strangely competent, if his ability to capture Naruto was any evidence.

FMB

Three Kakashi clones raced onto the field, chasing after the one wearing the white headband. "Protect me!" shouted the marked clone as he dove into the midst of the trio.

Kakashi watched from the top of the Hokage tower as his team struggled against his clones. They were doing well. For genin. It wasn't a matter of if they'd lose, just how long it took. In the meantime, he was scribbling in a notebook, working out what they'd do for the rest of the day. He wanted them to get more used to client-protection, as that was a mainstay of the village. For every mission to go and infiltrate somewhere or kill someone were a dozen protection details, escort or security.

FMB

"We've taken a fence-painting mission today," Kakashi informed his genin cheerfully. They were exhausted from two hours of constant battles learning how to protect a client who seemed bound and determined to commit suicide. Naruto was beaming, but all three were covered in dirt and sweat, and they sported heavy bruising (Naruto had minor bruises that were already fading). "But I don't believe in wasting money or opportunities. So you won't *buy* the paint. There are at least three genin teams doing similar missions

and any number of painters in the village. Procure supplies and complete the objective."

FMB

"That was better," Kakashi informed his team. Naruto was grinning, showing that three teeth were growing back in where they'd been knocked loose. Sasuke was lying on his back, breathing shallowly to avoid making the lacerations on his ribs hurt more. Hinata was quietly letting Kakashi heal the concussion she'd managed to incur. "You managed to escort the client most of the way to the objective before things went wrong. Who's ready for a mission?"

FMB

"Technically, you don't have the Tora mission today. That honor goes to Team 8. As usual, I do not think this should be an issue," Kakashi informed his team as they panted. It had been a change today, going on the assault instead of trying to defend. It had been eyeopening to see how the three clones of their sensei had seamlessly worked together to fend off every attack with ease. Nothing had done as good a job of driving home what Kakashi was trying to get them to manage and how far they were from it. "I'm sure the three of you know the drill."

"Go grab the cat and keep it away from everyone until the mission defaults, then turn him in for the bounty." Sasuke smirked a little. The nice thing about their missions was that after facing off against their sensei, a bunch of genin was such a cakewalk.

FMB

"Better," Kakashi said as he jogged alongside the medics. They'd stabilized Hinata and Sasuke and were now transporting them to the hospital for more thorough treatment. "Naruto managed to get the client to safety. Abandoning teammates is a sin, but dying pointlessly and getting an innocent killed in the process is no good either."

"On the upside, you managed to kill a chūnin-level clone. I think it was the jōnin clone that got your kidneys," he informed Hinata.

FMB

"My team is ready for a C-rank, Hokage-sama!"

"Thank goodness," muttered the assignment ninja. "Maybe I'll go a day without hearing a complaint about Team 7 interfering with missions."

"One of your genin appears to be wearing a sling, Kakashi." The Hokage's tone was conversational and he was calmly packing a pipe.

"Nevertheless, I think Uchiha-genin is more than capable of fighting with one arm. It will be good to get him started on one-handed seals anyway." Kakashi turned to the drunken man who walked into the room. "Hello, client-san. To where will we be escorting you?"

"Wave. I'm the Great Bridge Builder Tazuna!" The man hiccuped. "Are you making up for giving me brats by sending nine of them?"

"Come along, client-san." Kakashi grabbed the man and casually dragged him from the room. "We depart in an hour."

(A/N John)

We're publishing again! Woohoo! We've been writing less than I had hoped and I need to get back to *Itachi*, but I'm enjoying writing this story and I am aware that I am taking advantage of *For My Brother* to expand on the world of Naruto in ways that are probably unnecessary, but fun. Future chapters will be accompanied by extensive endnotes which explain various additions or explanations which I have come up with. There will be a separate publication of those notes as *For My Brother: The Collected Essays* .

(A/N 2 John)

Seriously: I enjoy expanding the world so much that I keep not actually writing story because I'm so busy adding my most recent ideas. The story is also a lot less humorous than I had originally planned and ends up taking some dark moments as I explore some of what it means to be a ninja. On the other hand, this is a somewhat charmed set of characters going through a dark and bloody world. Do not expect people to keep their hands clean here.

(A/N 3 John)

Not much else to say here. Spoon rolls her eyes at me when I bring up a new idea, but I just enjoy this task I've set for myself. The world is literally expanded, no longer being a day or so to cover it on foot. And the Hyūga have managed to get themselves special attention as Hinata's presence means that the intricacies of the family are on my mind. At some point, I'll probably allow for expansion elsewhere.

(A/N 4 John)

I love this version of Kakashi. He believes strongly in practical lessons and sees no reason to teach genin to do unninjal things like *buy* paint. Ninja supplies one should always purchase because the best suppliers are often retired ninja who will happily murder or hire the murder of those who rob them. *Icha Icha* should always be purchased to support the Great Sage Jiraiya (mayherestinpeace). But paint and ladders? No.

Undulation I

Chapter 4: Undulation I

Kakashi blinked as he stared at the three genin. "Have you had those just outfits just waiting around?"

"Yes, sensei." Hinata gave him a small smile. She had donned a black top of thick cloth belted closed at her waist with an orange sash. The sleeves were longer than her arms and voluminous; the forearm portions were decorated with thick, orange bands alternating with black. Kakashi glimpsed in her sleeve a pale hand wearing a fingerless glove extending up her arm, marked with the same stripes of orange and black. Her pants were taped around her shins, keeping the black fabric from flapping loosely.

Beside her, Naruto looked almost familiar. He was wearing bright orange still, but where it had been a jumpsuit before, it was now an orange A-shirt under an orange and black vest with dozens of pockets-Kakashi wondered if someone had stolen a sleeved flak jacket from a chūnin, but this one had the Uzumaki swirl on the back and the Uchiha uchiwa. The blond's pants were black with tiger-stripes of orange and sporting yet more pockets.

Sasuke, however, looked practically foreign. He wore a dark, hooded poncho made of dark greens and blues with a smattering of brown and which was irregular enough to break up his profile. From under the garment were flashes of metal from blades strapped to his forearms and he was carrying more shuriken and kunai than usual. To top it off, he had donned geta and was apparently comfortable balancing on them.

"Well, I'm glad you're taking this seriously." Kakashi didn't mention that he'd spotted where there had been panels of hardened leather sewn into the clothing on the inside. It wouldn't hold up to puncturing,

but it might spread out a blow and slashing would be almost worthless.

FMB

Tazuna grumbled and hid his eyes as best he could as the hangover started to hit. They'd been on the road for three days already and so far everything had been going fine. That wasn't making him any less nervous. And the sake had run out yesterday. That was worse. The jōnin leading the mission had allowed them to stop off in a small town only a little out of their way, but there was no alcohol left. The bar had been trashed, as had several buildings. He'd made a note to look them up if he lived and offer his aid in rebuilding.

FMB

Hinata didn't react directly, but she casually pushed her sleeves up slightly. Her teammates and sensei all picked up on that subtle movement. Of the three, only Naruto had no idea what had triggered the alert. The other two quickly spotted the puddle in the distance with the genjutsu over it.

Without appearing to think about it, Hinata drifted backwards until she stood slightly in front of the client, just a bit towards the side where the puddle would be when they passed. Naruto shifted forwards a bit, chakra beginning gather in his core. Sasuke shifted idly so that he was at the furthest point of a triangle drawn with his teammates as the corners. His eyes spun lazily and he, too, began to gather his chakra, his mouth growing hot while a thin throwing knife slipped down from his forearm so the grip rested in his palm. Kakashi struck up a conversation with their client, asking friendly questions about Wave, Tazuna's family, the weather, and generally chattering away. They looked alert, but no more than expected of a team on an escort mission.

The Demon Brothers sprang from their concealed hiding place with a vicious warcry, wrapping the adult ninja in their chain and shredding him in an explosion of gore. The genin didn't respond properly,

though. The orange one turned about and jumped at them, grabbing onto their chain with a bare hand. Before they could take that in, copies sprang out of him. They ignored the illusion. That turned out to be a mistake when each was punched in the face. Actually, it might have been a benefit; one of them would have been enough immolated by the fireball that flew by his head, setting his clothes to smoldering.

They detached their claws from the chain and rushed for the target, only to be forced to dodge out of the way as the pair dressed mostly in black intercepted them.

Gōzu swung his claw at the girl in front of him, noting that her eyes were surrounded by bulging veins. An open palm slapped his arm aside and he bit down on a scream as it felt like a jolt of fire shot through the limb. His fingers spasmed for a moment and he had to force himself to ignore the pain in time to dodge out of the way of her attempt to strike his chest. The dodge should have worked, but her arm stretched and clipped his shoulder, sending a new rush of fire through his body.

Meizu was feeling less pain, but was having no luck at striking the black-haired boy. The red of his eyes was something he thought he should recognize, but he kept having to fight on the defensive to deal with the perfect strikes aimed at openings in his guard. He had yet to be able to interpose his claw. If he could just scratch the kid, the poison would deal with him. He yelped as the kid performed a spinning kick and then spat a stream of flames, forcing him to jump back.

Naruto dropped the chain and charged at the ninja fighting Sasuke. His best friend preferred to operate at range, so he'd help. Four clones flowed out of him, running forwards and diving into the melee, trusting Sasuke to weave between them as Naruto himself joined the fray, exhaling white-hot fire that was dodged and set some of the trees alongside the road ablaze.

Neither Naruto or Sasuke looked to see what had made the scream of agony which cut off in a gurgle. They knew what Hinata sounded like when she was injured in a vast number of ways, thanks to their sensei, and that hadn't been her. The clones and Naruto started to corral their opponent, more clones forming to replace dying ones and cut off escapes as Sasuke prepared a bolt of flame. The ninja froze and then toppled forwards. Behind him, Hinata lowered her hand. "You were taking too long."

FMB

Kakashi strolled out of the tree line, hands in his pockets. He watched with interest as his team began to argue.

"Damn it, Hinata!" Sasuke was shouting. "Bad enough you did it with Mizuki, but you already had an opponent! Me and Naruto were already forced to share and then you stole him too!"

Hinata smiled faintly, the expression sweet and slightly disconcerting for Tazuna. He'd seen plenty of death since Gato had come to wave. The death of his son-in-law had been truly horrible, but several years of laboring under increasingly despotic rule had inured him to a great deal. The kind, slightly amused look on the face of a thirteen-year-old girl who had just killed two people was somehow worse. "I told you: you were taking too long."

Naruto frowned. "You have to call dibs on takedowns," he declared. He said it with such determination and finality that it would have been easy to mistake him for the highest ranking member of their team instead of the lowest-Sasuke was admittedly the only remaining member of his clan, but the Uchiha still wielded considerable political and economic power (his vote was currently proxied to the Hokage until he either turned sixteen or became a chūnin) and despite her father's distaste for Hinata's continual adaptation of the Interceptor style to her fighting (mostly in the form of kicks, which the Gentle Fist completely ignored), she was the heir presumptive. Hanabi might be the favored child, but there was ever decreasing doubt of Hinata's ability as a kunoichi. By comparison,

Naruto was just ninja-born, the Uzumaki had already been essentially defunct by the time of his birth; he held no status and there was no inheritance awaiting him.

Kakashi made his way over to the three of them. "I'm hurt," he said, theatrically laying a hand over his heart. "Wounded by your complete lack of concern about by sudden death."

"I saw the genjutsu," Sasuke tapped beside his eye socket.

"I could see you." Hinata shrugged. Kakashi had been surprised to learn the limit of her sight was much shorter than several of her relatives, but she made up for it with the ability to recognize more things at once(1).

"I hoped it was real," Naruto muttered.

Kakashi grinned behind his mask, his eyes gleaming with amusement. Then he turned serious again. "You shouldn't have killed them," he said, his tone stern.

"You told us we should always kill enemies in combat, sensei," Hinata sounded slightly defensive.

"This is true," Kakashi admitted. "However, it would have been good if we could have interrogated them. I'd have liked to find out where they were operating from, if they have accomplices, that sort of thing. I suspect it will be hard to get that information from their corpses." As he spoke, Kakashi crouched down and sealed the bodies into a scroll he drew from his pocket. "The Demon Brothers aren't exactly big money, but a couple of C-rank chūnin are still more cash than you three will see in a month of D-ranks."

"Why did you take those?" Hinata asked, pointing at the claws the brothers had worn. Sasuke had picked up the left-hand claw, Naruto the right.

"It's cool?" Naruto suggested. "Claws'd be useful."

"Not on the mission," Kakashi said. "You can learn to use new weapons on your own time. Client-san is paying us to escort him, not train." He held out his hands. "I'll give them back when we return to the village."

"Yes, sensei," the duo responded.

FMB

Hinata might have a good deal of control over herself thanks to life as a Hyūga, a clan with as much political activity as anything else, but when she saw the ninja crouched in the trees, a hundred yards away, she flinched. It wasn't that he was a ninja, but because despite the highly refined nature of his chakra, it still blazed to her sight, three tight balls of energy along the center of his torso, up to his head(2). Kakashi did not appear to notice, turning a page in his book and giggling, but to Hinata's sight, her sensei's normally active chakra network had burst into motion, cultivated centers increasing the flow to his limbs in preparation for a fight. Naruto and Sasuke were less subtle, Naruto pulling an explosive tag from his pocket and Sasuke pulling out a kunai with one hand and a trio of shuriken with the other.

"Incomi-DUCK!" Hinata dove to the ground. Sasuke, warned by the sharingan about the approaching weapon, was already dropping. Kakashi had shoved Tazuna down and crouched low, his legs in a runner's starting position. Sasuke grabbed Naruto's ankle and yanked his leg out from under him in the nick of time. The Uchiha sighed at the mix of fearlessness and insanity in his best friend which was the only explanation for the pair of shadow clones springing from Naruto's back and kicking upwards, slightly altering the trajectory of the sword. It wasn't much, but when trying to perform a precision technique, a little makes a difference.

Momochi Zabuza yelped as he had to grip the side of the tree with chakra and swing his body upwards horizontally to avoid the blade that should have been right below his feet. "Well, well, well," he kept his voice low and menacing, trying to recapture some of the threat

that should have attended the moment. "A jōnin out with his genin. Look at those bright, innocent faces without a notch on their kunai."

"I would have," Naruto grumbled. "But Hinata keeps stealing them."

Zabuza blinked. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. He released his killing intent and watched the bridge builder pass out. The three genin seemed to be unaffected, unless one counted them standing back up and dusting themselves off.

"Momochi Zabuza," Kakashi's voice was lazy even as he tucked his precious book away. "Nukenin of Kirigakure; former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Known for stealth assassinations of high-value targets. An A-rank ninja-perhaps a little more when hiding in the mist."

"Hatake Kakashi-eeep!" the assassin was forced to cut short his intended speech because there was suddenly a second jōnin in the tree and that one was trying to disembowel him with a kunai. Right. Time for talk had clearly passed. Instinctively, his sword lashed out, cleaving through six clones of the blond. They burst into smoke as Zabuza was forced to dodge another swing from Kakashi. Six more clones shouted battle cries and dove into the melee, bursting into smoke again as Zabuza slaughtered them. But there were six more behind that wave and ten following them, all charging in at full tilt, screaming at the tops of their lungs. Beside him, three copies of the blond appeared and when his fist crushed the head of one, it crumbled into a pile of dirt. What the hell was going o-he flung himself backwards.

"Are you going to try?" Kakashi asked, sounding as though this were a conversation instead of a battle. "I mean, if you want to commit suicide, you could have just said."

Zabuza realized what had been wrong with the scene (aside from the new wave of clones charging at him and the crop of clones appearing next to him): Kakashi had two visible eyes. Both of them were half-lidded as Kakashi continued to press Zabuza just hard

enough that the man was being forced to scramble and dodge desperately from killing strokes.

Somehow, he found an opportunity to throw a few water clones out, who began to methodically carve their way through the stream of clones which he was fairly certain should be taxing the reserves of an experienced ninja, never mind a genin. And the damned earth clones didn't have to travel to reach him and so kept up their appearances at inopportune times. Why weren't those two other genin doing anything? The pair had taken up positions around the bridge builder and were clearly in combat readiness, but other than that, nothing. What was worse, he was getting tired.

FMB

Hinata cocked her head. "Do you think the hunter-nin out there will step in soon?" she murmured. "Oh, there we go."

A pair of senbon flew from the trees and lanced into Zabuzza's neck. He dropped like a puppet with cut strings and the masked ninja crouched beside him in a burst of speed. "Thank you for tiring him out. I'll take it from here."

"Hunter-san," Hinata began. "He's not-" she was cut off as Sasuke tackled her and Tazuna to the ground. The area Zabuzza had lain was a crater after the explosive tags went off. "-dead." she finished from the ground.

A hand came down on Naruto's shoulder, halting the genin. "I can't leave you three to pursue and by that same token, you're not skilled enough to be sent out to hunt on your own. We have a client to get home."

"Yes, sensei." Naruto grumbled. Then he grinned in a way that made Sasuke wince and Hinata beam. It was the grin of a fox-spirit who just thought of some wonderful bit of mischief. Naruto formed his fingers into a cross and frowned.

"What are..." Kakashi trailed off as Naruto began to give off a bluish aura as the gathering chakra started to surround him. It was a sign of how much chakra he was gathering that he wasted enough to be visible. And that his chakra was unrefined enough to temporarily escape his network when there was waste. It also said something about how much chakra Naruto *had* . It was one thing to know his sensei had sealed the Kyūbi into his son and another to see the raw energy that... why wasn't it red? Kakashi gulped at the thought that his student had this much chakra *on his own* . What the hell had his sensei been up to? The barest flicker of purple began to show up. "That's probably enough, Naruto."

"Right." The world turned orange, black, and yellow.

NOTE: While I, and many of you, are aware of Naruto's origins, the list of persons in-setting who are aware is roughly seven. The Hokage obviously knows, as does Jiraiya. Kakashi is a highly capable ninja and was extremely close to both his late sensei and and his sensei's wife-it was inevitable that he would work it out. Being a good ninja, he didn't say anything. Two members of ANBU are aware, both of them were guards for Kushina in the birthing chamber and so know who the Fourth used as the container. Nara Shikaku is just plain smart and as Jōnin-Commander, has access to a great deal of classified information. Finally, Shimura Danzō knows. He has yet to decide how that knowledge can be used to benefit the village, so has remained quiet for now.

Endnote 1: Many of Hinata's relatives have significant range to their sight. Her cousin can see nearly a kilometer; her father can see almost half again a kilometer; her little sister can even see five hundred meters. By comparison, Hinata's sight is pathetic. Her limit is the same as the distance at which she can see normally-maybe three hundred meters. Most of her clan measures the power of the Byakugan strictly based on reach and feel Hinata does not measure up. However, Hinata makes up for lack of range with depth and processing.

As a rule, the Hyūga can process more information than a normal ninja-the Byakugan works rather like a graphics card that has an on-board processor and RAM, it handles a lot of the extra sensory input. Nevertheless, there are limits to how much they can see at once and how precise that sight is. A "normal" Hyūga can pay attention to an average of five things visually, including normal-from-the-face sight. The precision they can examine something with is the same as if they were physically there, nothing more than the naked eye. Hinata, though, can track ten things independent of normal sight and can examine things with up to a hundred-times magnification. Whether this is better or worse depends on your preferences.

FMB

Endnote 2: Chakra circulates through the body via a set of channels akin to arteries. As a ninja progresses through his career, he will often take a great deal of trouble to refine his chakra. In essence, a ninja meditates, creating a sort of energy-kidney which pulls the more impure elements of his chakra from the stream and expels them as heat. Refined chakra is generally more efficient in the amount required to achieve an effect, be it using ninjutsu or strengthening muscles for a taijutsu specialist.

Especially capable ninja will compress their chakra, creating a series of up to eight "hearts" each located over a chakra gate. Each of these hearts helps speed the circulation of chakra and, at the same time, keeps chakra in later stages of moulding, allowing yet more efficient use of chakra and with less time required.

Chakra does not get expended in the way that calories do. Chakra which is used is more akin to blood which has supplied oxygen to tissues, returning to the pool of depleted chakra to await restoration. With the exception of sages, who can use natural energy, chakra depletion is cured only with time. There are those with exceptional large reserves of chakra, but there are also those whose chakra restores more rapidly. Those who have their "hearts" not only have a more efficient use of chakra, but the "hearts" draw energy through the gates to replenish the reserves. The "hearts" also speed the

moulding of chakra by pre-converting-that is to say that a heart might be cultivated to align with water. This does not suddenly grant a water affinity in the manner of Jiongu, but rather it eliminates the usual process of, for example, a ninja with a fire affinity having to convert his chakra to water element before using a technique. The usual difficulties still attend the use of non-aligned chakra, but without the time and effort of converting at the time of need. Hearts can be shaped to various affinities. Aside from the elemental and spiritual affinities, they might be aligned to medical techniques, or even shape-manipulation.

As a rule, a genin needs to draw his chakra together, work it into the element required, shape it, and then finally wield the effect. Handseals are mnemonics used to help with this process. Roughly ninety-seven percent of all techniques are formed using the twelve basic seals which are associated with the most versatile chakra-moulding.

A chūnin will probably still need handseals in order to perform most jutsu, but he has a few techniques which he has managed to learn the shaping of so completely that he can run through the steps without having to use the memory aids of seals.

An experienced chūnin will have begun to refine his chakra allow for more efficient use and has probably mastered a handful of techniques. An especially capable example will be able to enhance her body while also using a technique.

Tokebetsu jōnin have completed the refining of their chakra, that being one of the minimum requirements for the rank. There will be a small suite of techniques he has down to no longer need seals.

Someone who has reached the rank of jōnin can reasonably be assumed to have begun cultivation of his chakra and that he will continue to do so during the course of his career.

Those who reach the vaunted ranks of Kage or even enter into more general legend are almost certain to have completed their cultivation.

That isn't enough to even the fight between two otherwise unequal combatants, but endurance and effect of a cultivated network will let an experienced jōnin outlast and defeat even a more skilled junior within certain limits.

It is worth noting that Senju Tsunade alone has taken the principles of chakra cultivation to an extreme. Her Strength of a Hundred is, in essence, an artificial ninth cultivar which is specialized in healing and muscle augmentation.

The curse marks, conversely, are Orochimaru's crude attempts to replicate the successes of his teammates-Jiraiya's usage of natural energy and the supreme example of chakra cultivation of Tsunade. It works. Barely.

FMB

(A/N John)

So as you may have noticed, we published a chapter of this instead of more *Itachi* . No real reason. Other than that I wanted to work on this a bit.

(A/N 2 John)

Also, we have reached the point where my expansions to the Naruto world have resulted in actual endnotes. While I normally abhor notes in the middle of the story, when one is including endnotes, it's customary to mark to what they relate.

Things Diverge a Little

Chapter 4: Things Diverge a Little

"How is he not exhausted?" muttered Kakashi as they strolled down the road. The massive tidal wave of clones had given a shout and rushed off into the forest, spreading out as they did. He guessed they were searching for Zabuza and the hunter-nin. Naruto was a little ways ahead, still brimming with energy. He'd just seen the boy pull every scrap of chakra- *human* chakra-out for use and he wasn't apparently bothered.

"Naruto doesn't get tired, sensei." Hinata had a faint blush on her cheeks as she watched her teammate. "You know that."

"I knew he didn't get tired running after a demon cat," Kakashi retorted. "What he just did now? That is *not* normal."

"It's Naruto," Sasuke said, apparently under the impression that this was an explanation.

"That hunter is pretty good," Naruto said, having bounced his way back to the group. "He keeps taking out my clones whenever they get close. Sooner or later, they'll manage it, though."

"Or die," Sasuke muttered.

"Or die," Naruto admitted, not bothered in the slightest.

FMB

A day later saw them arriving at the home of their client. It didn't look very good, there was scorching and the door had been kicked in.

"This could be a problem," Sasuke muttered. This was far too familiar. Thankfully, when he poked his head inside, there weren't any bodies. "Looks like intimidation, not elimination."

"Time to go find where your family is staying, bridge-builder-san," Hinata suggested.

FMB

The forests of Hi no Kuni had been replaced with a desolate island. It was one of the most godsforsaken rocks Kakashi had ever seen. Nothing seemed to grow on the whole thing, just bare rock rising out of the waters. It wasn't for the calm of the sea around the island, the place would be utterly worthless. As it was, it was a major point to ship goods into Hi no Kuni-water being cheaper and faster than land routes (ninja tended to operate on dry land).

The main street of the largest city (and "city" was being rather generous, in Kakashi's opinion. The whole place could have fit in one of Konoha's districts and was less populated than that) was deserted. Most of the shops on either side were thoroughly closed, with broken windows and doors. A few had been burned to the ground. And always, an ever-present mist clung to everything, turning the world gray.

Since none of the ninja had ever seen Tazuna's family, Hinata couldn't just use the Byakugan to hunt for them. Instead, they were forced to sneak up on the small groups of people who were huddled in run-down shacks and shabby, ill-maintained buildings. People who shrieked in fear whenever someone knocked on a door or window and tried to ask a question. Even Tazuna only had mixed success in getting neighbors he'd known for years to talk to him.

It was only by brute force that they found Tsunami and Inari. Hinata had been directing them only to groups with at least one woman of child-bearing age and one child of roughly eight years, but there were more than enough of them.

FMB

"Why are we staying?" Sasuke asked. He might have grown in his ability to empathize, but it was still limited to those he was close to.

The general mass of humanity was just a thing that existed and it was a sign of his progress that he now merely didn't care instead of hating them.

"They need our help!" snapped Naruto. Normally, he deferred to his best friend, but then there were the times that they butted heads. Where Sasuke treated those not in his personal sphere as so much flesh, Naruto saw the whole world as people who were deserving of love.

"We're not getting *paid*," Sasuke grumbled. "We're ninja, Naruto. We're *mercenaries* ."

"Good news on that front," Hinata said. She was watching Naruto with a smile as he showed his caring side again. "Our sensei just had words with Tazuna-san. He told him that no matter how poor and in trouble a place may be, hiring a trio of genin to defend him from Momochi Zabuza was going to cost him an arm and a leg." Naruto and Sasuke both frowned. Neither was entirely happy with that answer, but both were partly mollified.

"That's right," Kakashi announced as he walked into the room. "Sasuke's right that we're supposed to get paid, but Naruto's right that we should help people in need." He grabbed their heads and smacked them together. "Now get your asses back out on guard duty."

FMB

Construction on the bridge was not appreciably altered by Naruto's presence. Despite the horde of clones ready and willing to perform manual labor, the fact was that without training, they couldn't do much more than carry things and hold things. Admittedly, this covered a lot of bridge-building, but there was always the minor detail of actually putting it together. Tazuna was laboring in the absence of most of the workers he normally had-people were staying away from the project. No matter how safe it supposedly was with a bunch of ninja around, those ninja couldn't be everywhere and

sooner or later, Gato's people would get some revenge. Wave knew the price of crossing the short man.

What with guard duty, training was very different from what the genin were used to. Instead of sparring with each other or against their sensei, they were given exercises to work on with varying degrees of success. Hinata's ability to see her chakra network meant that she was far ahead of the other two in any exercise that was about control. Kakashi was all about practical experience and foundational knowledge. Anyone guarding was expected to be in disguise, hiding not only their identity, but their profession as well-while at the same time going through a series of increasingly difficult routines designed to prepare them for future learning.

By default, Naruto had the most success with element conversion-one of the most difficult aspects of ninjutsu was the wielding of chakra with a different alignment. While Sasuke and Hinata were carefully working to alter the nature of small amounts of their chakra, Naruto simply went through the conversion process and paid the normally exorbitant cost in wasted energy without noticing. Kakashi was struggling to explain to the blond why it was that he had to learn how to make the conversion more efficient when he could just burn the extra chakra.

While Sasuke would normally brood over the fact that he had nothing in which he was superior to his teammates, he had been living with Naruto for years and Hinata might as well live in his house much of the time. It was hard to be upset with people who were effectively family when he had only them left. And if Hinata happened to offer him hints, he took them with the grace of someone who was determined to be the best whatever the cost-even if that cost was accepting help. Besides, being annoyed at Naruto was like kicking a rather sweet puppy and Naruto's successes didn't really count anyway, because he wasn't actually doing the exercise.

In fact, the thing that had Sasuke most displeased was that Wave was exactly the wrong climate for tomatoes and imports were basically halted at the moment-actually, there was one thing more

upsetting than that: it was the perfect climate for ramen. He had to drag Naruto away from the one remaining ramen stand every day so that they could eat what meager, but nutritional, food had been scrounged. Amongst themselves, the ninja were wondering what Gato was up to-food stores were nearly exhausted, nothing was moving through the ports, and the land itself was barren-Wave was just a short ways from starvation.

Kakashi had been forced to veto Naruto's plan to go kill Gato six times on the grounds that without more complete information, they couldn't be sure what kind of enemies they'd face and their forces were divided enough just guarding Tsunami and Inari while protecting Tazuna at the same time. If he had been sure that there wouldn't be a few ninja to head out and capitalize on his absence, he'd have gone after Gato that first day to remove the threat-but he wasn't and he couldn't.

Hinata was most often stationed in and around the main street or at the wharfs by the bridge, places where she could get best coverage with her Byakugan. Naruto was almost invariably assigned to Tazuna because even unskilled labor was better than nothing. Sasuke was the one who moved around the most. Some days he was on detail with Naruto, sometimes he was sent to wander the "city", sometimes he guarded the family, with the joy of listening to the brat drone on and on about how everything was hopeless until he tested out his ability to wield killing intent by sharing some of the helpless terror he'd felt the night his family had died and sent the kid to the floor, vomiting and voiding himself. It wasn't satisfying, but the kid understood that he hadn't nearly plumbed the depths of horror that he could have experienced. Kakashi wasn't sure if his student managing to manifest killing intent was a good thing.

FMB

Hinata knelt on the sloped roof of the house the family was staying in. From that position, she could perform regular sweeps of the area without having to move. As an added bonus, she worked on her camouflage. It wasn't too hard to fade into the grays of the roof with

the clinging fog obscuring everything. If this was what "Wave" was like, she hated to see what a village "Hidden in the Mist" looked like.

"Ninja-san!" One of Hinata's points of view snapped downwards to examine Tsunami. The older woman had been a quiet bastion of strength in comparison to her timid, whining son. Hinata was far more kindhearted than her dark-haired teammate, but she had gotten tired of listening to the litany of reasons why she was going to die. That was why she'd taken to guarding from the rooftop, with all the cloying chill that entailed, rather than continue to put up with the child. The boy's mother, though, was calm and soft-spoken, but Hinata had never doubted the inner strength at her core-she had lost two lovers and yet continued to provide for her child as best she could, look after her aging father, and had yet to give in to the fear that grasped the whole island.

The woman held a bento box in one hand. "Ninja-san. I need to bring father his lunch." She made a sharp squeaking sound and clutched her chest when Hinata dropped to stand beside her.

"Alright, Tsunami-san." Hinata stepped inside the house and emerged, dragging a protesting Inari. "Take his hand," she ordered. "I can't leave him behind." It wasn't in her nature to be so short, but the kid was really annoying.

FMB

They were a little more than halfway to the bridge when Hinata froze, just for a moment. "Tsunami-san, listen very carefully to me." Tsunami blinked, she'd never heard the girl's voice go so cold. "Take your son and go to a friend's house. Anywhere but where you've been staying. Do you understand?"

"Wha-"

" *Do you understand?* "

"Y-yes. What's this?" Tsunami looked down at the kunai that had been shoved into her hand in place of the bento box.

"Keep it with you. If they're getting through the door, kill Inari and then yourself. You'll be doing both of you a favor. Now go woman!" Hinata took off, hoping that she made it in time and that her client's idiot spawn didn't get themselves killed standing in the street while she worked.

FMB

Sasuke hissed in pain and tested the range of motion on his shoulder. Despite his Sharingan, the hunternin was so fast that it was barely enough to keep him safe. Naruto was lending what help he could, slinging clones by the dozen into combat, but most of them were dedicated to trying to keep Zabuza pinned for their sensei.

The fog was thick enough that the Sharingan's range was cut down to almost nothing. That, combined with Zabuza's specialty being hunting in mist, and Kakashi had his work cut out for him. He was managing defensively, but sooner or later, he would need to kill the man.

Sasuke swore as the hunternin went through a series of seals that his eyes tried to copy and just cataloged for later perusal. He'd read enough of his family's scrolls to know what that meant: *bloodline*. The floating, reflective surface was unexpectedly tame. Up until the ninja stepped into his reflection and became two-dimensional. Experimentally, Sasuke's hands ran through a series of seals of his own and he spat a grand fireball which he was unsurprised to find did nothing to what he was beginning to suspect was a mirror made of ice.

He threw himself to the side as his eyes gave him a moment's warning before the hunternin came flying out of the mirror on a horizontal vector which took the bastard into another mirror that had Sasuke had missed.

"Please, ninja-san," the voice was soft and seemed to come from everywhere. Sasuke was suspecting that might really be the case, since he was noticing more and more mirrors around him, forming a dome, each of them with an image of the hunter in it. "If you just surrender the bridge-man, we will let you go."

"That's not how this works," hissed Sasuke. It would be so easy to give in to the despair. He was outmatched and he knew it. They had managed to back the team into a corner, arranging it so the terrain was as much an enemy as any ninja. He wasn't really fighting to win anymore, just trying to delay the inevitable long enough for Kakashi to win and come save him. It stung his pride to know he'd been reduced to relying on another for protection, but Yamanaka-san had made sure he always tried to be realistic about situations. "I'm a ninja of Konoha, I don't betray the client. The First gave us the Will of Fire. The Second tempered it into a village. The Third labors to stoke its flames. The Fourth gave his life for it. I am a ninja of Konohagakure and I carry the Will of Fire. I do not give up. Though it may cost me my life, I will burn brightly until I am snuffed out. When I am gone, my Will shall be passed to another in turn. I am the Will of Fire." It was a poor comfort to wrap himself in one of the mantras he'd been taught in the Academy, but he drew strength from the familiar words. He'd never understood what it really meant until now, facing his own death and knowing that if he fell, he would be avenged. His friends would see his body returned to his home and would carry his name to the Memorial Stone, to be one with those who had blazed for the village. It wasn't a mantra to live by. It was a death chant-something for a soldier to hold close to his heart in the face of his end.

Calm settled around Sasuke's body like a cloak. He could do this. He would hold out as long as he could. If he died, he would do so ensuring that Naruto could get away safely. His best friend would never get over it, but he'd be alive to suffer. "Come on, then," he snarled as he felt the village's fire kindle in his bones. "Let's see if you have what it takes to douse me."

The images of the huntress crouched, a hand pulling senbon from its kimono, the picture of faceless, anonymous death. Sasuke shifted his stance, crouching and pulling a kunai. He would sell his life as dearly as he could. The image shifted slightly.

Sasuke hit the ground, air leaving his lungs explosively as something shoved him down. At almost the same time, he heard the sound of metal striking meat and a heavy weight landed on his back.

He struggled to rise, his limbs weakened by the loss of blood over the course of the fight. A body rolled off his back and landed beside him. For several moments, he stayed frozen as he tried to will it not to be true. It was no illusion. That meant that he was really seeing this. Lying on the ground was his first friend, senbon riddling her body and a trickle of blood running from her mouth.

The world spun crazily for a moment. He'd sworn he would never cry again and he didn't feel his eyes tearing, but fluid ran down his cheeks as knowledge settled into his brain, clicking into place with a horrible finality. This was the cost his brother had spoken of. It was too high. With just a glimmer of movement in the corner of his eye, he snatched a senbon from the air easily. His lips drew back, baring his teeth in an animal rage. It was happening again. Someone died to protect him. Again.

Everything shifted, turning to shades of red and black as he turned his head, eyes picking out the real huntress from the illusions. "I am a soldier of Konoha," he hissed. "When someone snuffs the fire of our own, we set him ablaze to replace the light. Feel the Will of Fire and *burn* ! Amaterasu!" Black flames licked out from his feet and leapt across the open space to strike the huntress as the ninja tried to switch mirrors.

There was a shriek of agony that drew a responding chuckle from Sasuke. It didn't even begin to fill the yawning pit that he was falling into, but he'd take the comfort it offered. It was a balm for the renewed agony he'd thought settled. "That's it," he growled. "Scream for me."

He flickered across the bridge, landing with his knee on the huntarnin's chest, pinning the ninja in place while the flames consumed his legs. "You took her away. Now you can follow. When you get to hell, tell them you're the vanguard for Hyūga Hinata!" He rammed his hand into the huntarnin's chest, feeling the sternum shatter and drove the shards of bone into the heart beneath. There was a harsh gasp and a liquid sound from under the mask and then a geyser of blood splashed Sasuke.

Sasuke knew the moment Naruto had seen Hinata's body. The fog blasted away from the bridge as a malevolent presence made itself known. Where killing intent from Momochi Zabuza had done nothing, this sent a wave of fear through him, but that was followed by a sort of savage joy as he realized what he was feeling. Naruto would be beside him as they got revenge.

There was a roar and then an orange-red blur slashed across the open space at the sword-wielding ninja who had dropped to his knees, apparently suffering a panic attack. Naruto's voice was barely possible to understand as he spoke a single word: " **DIE!** " Hands formed claws and the cloak of chakra around him copied his motions as he set into the stunned ninja, rending him to smaller and smaller pieces which were evaporating as the demonic chakra annihilated the human tissue.

Kakashi observed the tableau and decided to address one problem at a time. His students were no longer in any danger, so if they wanted to take their time destroying some enemy corpses, that was fine by him. Instead, he walked over to Hinata's body and cocked his head, considering the matter carefully. He reached down and plucked a senbon from where it had punctured just below her sternum and Hinata's eyes snapped open as she took in a gasp of air. There were two claps of displaced air as Naruto and Sasuke were suddenly beside their teammate.

Naruto, his cloak dissipating, began to remove the remaining senbon from Hinata, with assistance from Kakashi, whose medical skills were severely lacking, but capable of closing up superficial wounds.

Sasuke had his arms wrapped around Hinata and was mumbling into her shoulder as he seemed to be trying to merge himself with her. For her part, once her arm was able to move, Hinata began to stroke her friend's hair, crooning the soothing sounds she remembered her own mother making for her.

Hinata stiffened. "We have company coming." Sasuke and Naruto were instantly on their feet, crouching beside her. Naruto's eyeteeth were lengthening and his eyes began to turn red. Sasuke's Sharingan spiraled, turning into a complex pattern.

"Well, well, well," the voice was one of the type that declared to the world that its owner was the worst sort of bastard. A man who delights in small evils and bullying those who can't fight back, but is not, himself, able to inflict any sort of harm. A man who, when presented with the opportunity, simply cannot help himself but inflict suffering on his fellow man, even if it is to his detriment to do so. In short, Gato. "It looks like those ninja I hired were nice enough to get themselves killed instead of costing me money. Goes to show that quality over quantity isn't a winning strategy. You lot must be the ninja who've been interfering in my business. It's cruel of you to give these idiots hope so that it can be taken away when I display your broken bodies for them. All except the girl. I think she's more valuable sold to a whorehouse."

Kakashi closed his eyes as he felt his students snap. Malevolent chakra lashed from Naruto as his pupils slitted and his fingernails hardened into claws. Blue bubbled from his skin, swiftly turning purple and then an angry reddish-orange, a single tail lashing behind him as he let out a guttural snarl. Sasuke's form was quickly surrounded by brilliant, purple-white chakra that formed itself into an armored samurai armed with bow and wakizashi. The two of them vanished and appeared in the midst of the mercenary army. Screams exploded from the mass a moment later as claws and black flames shredded into the assembled men.

Flesh parted, dissolving before Naruto's claws or melting in his jaws as he tore out throats with his fangs. On the other side of the horde,

Sasuke was laying about himself with the ethereal blade he'd created, the weapons of the ill-trained fighters bouncing off the armor around him, while he scoured the bridge with cleansing flames.

In short order, all that was left was a trembling Gato, on his knees and trembling as Sasuke and Naruto looked at him, glaring. Naruto crouched, hunched forwards, head cocked to the side as he rumbled something deep in his chest. Sasuke had a sneer on his face as he stared at the small man. "No, that's too fast. Ameterasu takes days to do its work. That would be better." Naruto's response was another series of deep, inhuman sounds. "Tempting, but unsatisfying. No matter how poetic that would be, I want to feel his heart split around my hand and watch him bleed."

"P-p-please," Gato was directing his plea straight ahead, between the two.

"Dibs." Both of them stared in shock as a slim arm in black and orange stripes stretched between them and smacked Gato on the forehead.

Sasuke fell to the ground, clutching his sides and laughing.

FMB

Kakashi heard the sound of laughter and decided it was time to investigate, since it sounded like his student had gone from acceptably murderous rage into outright psychotic break. As he approached, he observed that Naruto was no longer surrounded by a cloak of chakra, but his eyes were still slitted and his eyeteeth were oversized.

"What the hell, Hinata?" There was a slightly feral quality to Naruto's voice and he was gesticulating wildly. If his hands had been bloody, the gore would have been flying everywhere.

"You were taking too long." Hinata gave him a sweet smile, her recent injuries keeping her pale enough that her blush merely looked

like healthy color was returning to her cheeks. "And I even called dibs like you insisted."

"You're supposed to do that *at the start* !" Naruto shouted. "Not just steal the kill at the last moment!"

"But you and Sasuke had already had plenty of kills, and I've not done anything since the Demon Brothers," Hinata pointed out mildly.

"Sasuke?" Kakashi crouched beside his student, ready to leap if a threat became evident. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Besides, Naruto-kun, I thought it fitting that I get to dispatch the man who made the threat against me. I don't need protecting."

"I'm f-f-fine!" Sasuke was struggling to speak between peals of laughter. "Hinata's s-stealing kills! Everything's back-back to n-normal!"

"When you're injured?" Naruto demanded, leaning close and examining her recent wounds.

Hinata didn't respond, but allowed her crush to check her over-not entirely sure that he didn't have a point there.

(A/N Spoon)

No author notes from John this week. Sorry!

John Didn't Title This Either

Chapter 6: John Didn't Title This Either

Kakashi hummed to himself as he strolled into Gato's compound. Thanks to Naruto's clones, the remaining mercenaries who had been venting their displeasure at the loss of a paycheck were rounded up in short order and had been turned over to what currently passed for justice in Wave. At the moment, that was a tribunal of Tsunami and two other survivors whose attitude towards capital punishment could be broadly called "enthusiastic". While the "trials" were still going on, Naruto had been also helping the suddenly staffed crew of bridge builders. Kakashi wasn't sure what a bridge would do for a trading port that acted as a hub, rather than producing much trade goods, but that wasn't his problem.

He calmly formed a trio of shadow clones and began to search the area for money. If he were a kinder man, the money would be left with Wave to help them rebuild, but Konoha had put in far more than a C-rank mission's worth of service on this job and that required repaying with a hefty supplement to remind others that the mission-rankings were not just suggestions. On the other hand, Wave was ripe for the plucking... it would be a waste to not make use of it. He nodded to himself and resolved to turn this whole mess over to the Hyūga when they returned to the village. Let the ones with the twisty-thinking and the forked tongues figure out how to milk Wave properly

.

FMB

He came upon his students training, that was normal. What was unusual-rather, what was the new normal-was Sasuke hovering next to Hinata as they broke for lunch. From what Kakashi had observed, the only time Sasuke wasn't within a foot of Hinata was when she was in the bathroom. And that only because Naruto was physically restraining him and seeding the area with clones. Kakashi had

already resolved to get the lad an appointment with Inoichi the moment they got back to the village. As one of the few people privy to the real events of the Uchiha Massacre, he was aware of several things and was planning to sort them out while the lad was getting a talking to. Come to think of it, they should chat about killing fifty or so men and not reacting.

Sasuke and Hinata had repaired their clothes to the best of their abilities, with varying degrees of success and remedying varying damages. Hinata had needed to patch several places that had been flashing her breast-band through her top. Sasuke had plenty of tears and rips to repair, which he had coupled with a layer of chains under the poncho which Kakashi was going to have to remind him to baffle. Naruto hadn't even needed to wash his clothes, all the blood and even his own sweat had been evaporated by the cloak he'd manifested.

Speaking of which, Sasuke and Naruto were both experimenting with their newly unlocked and/or discovered abilities. The swathe of burned trees and slashed stumps bore witness to Sasuke's efforts. It was hard to identify Naruto's achievements, mostly because his ninjutsu was so destructive that spotting any change in the level of damage caused was academic at best. Naruto reported that he had trouble bringing up the cloak unless he focused on anger and fear, but that he was doing okay at what the team had taken to calling pre-cloak and maintaining it.

For Kakashi, who'd been on the front lines against the beast, it was something horrible to see the malevolent eyes of the Kyūbi staring out a face that was a mix of his sensei and his sensei's wife. But the moment he actually *looked*, the difference was plain: there was a softness that had been lacking in the raging creature that had devastated Konoha. There was a hard edge, but none of the undirected hatred of all living creatures. Understanding his most energetic student had been something of an exercise at first, as he was relearning to speak with canines that were too large to be human and a voice that had not merely dropped as most boys' did,

but had picked up an extra timbre as though there were a second mouth speaking which had a vocabulary of noises rather than speech.

And there had been learning to not scratch things. Naruto was learning how to not wreck his bedding, his friends, and even his own face with fingernails that had become claws. So had his toenails, but that took less relearning and his teammates would just have to get used to being sliced by kicks.

Kakashi had to admit to a perverse interest in finding out what Konoha would do with a jinchuriki who sported red eyes.

FMB

All told, the journey home had been rather dull. Without the added interest of over-mission ninja attacking and not having to slow down for an old man, they moved rather quicker. What had been a journey taking nearly a fortnight was done just shy of a week. If it hadn't been for Sasuke's unwillingness to allow Hinata out of his sight, it would have been a calm journey. For Kakashi, it was, but Naruto was working to ensure that Sasuke at least physically gave Hinata some space, even if he was hovering.

FMB

"Hi guys!" Naruto bounded up to the gate guards, his exuberant joy at being home evident in his burst of extra pep as he grinned at them, showing those giant canines and beaming with his slitted pupils.

"Demon!" The chūnin on guard rapidly decided between them that retreat was the better part of valor and fled to hi-seek reinforcements.

Kakashi shrugged. "I'm going to go report to the Hokage. I feel that this is a report best given promptly. Do head home."

FMB

Hinata cocked her head as she walked down the main street of Konoha. Naruto had split off a while ago. "Why are you following me, Sasuke? Your home is the other direction."

"I'm making sure you're safe."

"Ah."

"Besides, this isn't the way to your home. This looks rather more like Tee and..." he trailed off as a firm hand clasped his shoulder. He glanced up and saw Morino Ibiki frowning at him. "Morino-san?"

"You have an appointment," Hinata said, her smile not unkind.

"But how will I keep her safe?" Sasuke demanded as Ibiki calmly dragged him into the building. On his way through the door, Ibiki grabbed Naruto, who'd just been leaving.

"Come on, kid, you have an appointment as well."

FMB

"Sasuke, care to explain why I was informed I needed to have a prompt meeting with you?" Inoichi leaned forwards, elbows resting on his desk, hands clasped in front of his face, eyes calm, but his expression was probing.

"Hinata's in danger!"

"I've been monitoring Hiashi..."

"Not from him!"

"Oh? Who from, then?"

"Everything!"

"Ah."

FMB

Naruto sat on the chair they'd dumped him on. The room was utterly devoid of anything but the metal seat, which was not only bolted to the floor, but the bolts had been welded and rivets had been used to secure it as well. Naruto considered this overkill in spite of the fact that it was only that combination which had prevented him from taking it apart so he could make something.

They'd done a thorough search, way better than the chūnin who usually did it, and had even found his *hidden* hidden pockets. Most of it he was informed he would get back when he left the building, but several of his specialist supplies had been confiscated outright. He was still deciding how to get them back. He was rather upset that they had taken even his string. He'd told them (honestly, as it happened) that he wanted to be able to at least pay cat's cradle with himself to keep from boredom, but they had (reasonably) declared that T&I policy was that anyone named Uzumaki Naruto was not allowed to have anything but a T&I-issued jumpsuit while in the building.-T&I existed to ensure the secure holding of dangerous ninja who often were rather good at either escaping (killing several people on their way out) or killing themselves (taking their information to the grave); either way, they specialized in preventing this outcome.-The end result was that Naruto was truly bored for the first time in several years. At least in school he had some stuff on hand and could tinker with mechanisms to make traps. Or try and trap the room while instruction was going on. Or just cut. *Something* .

The door banged open and a woman stepped into the room. Stepped was not, in fact, the right word. The less... cultured... would have called it "undulation"-Naruto was educated in these matters after living four years in the seedier parts of Konoha. It was, in fact, a very particular type of walk that combined the confidence of a strut with the attention-grabbing effect of a sashay to declare to the viewer that this was someone who was more than happy to cut the viewer's throat, but that the walker also knew the viewer was too busy

enjoying being the viewer to notice until the knife was actually wet with blood.

She was dressed for the effect as well. For no apparent reason, her hair was pulled into almost a topknot, the short ends spiked out in their explosive attempt to return to their natural state of slightly-tousled. Her face had no makeup, but there were a few tiny dots along the tops of her cheekbones, just under her eyes, that resembled animal markings. A tan coat covered her shoulders and arms, the bottom flaring at the middle of her calves, weighted to catch the unaware a stinging blow or be flicked into a sight-line to keep someone blind for a crucial moment. Her chest was one of the best Naruto had seen, his somewhat practiced eye telling him that they were natural and well-formed, rounded instead of elongated. All she was covering them with was a thin shirt which was as low-cut as it could be without allowing bouncing. Other than that, a pair of sandals, and a pouch strapped to her right thigh, all she wore was a skirt what was barely high enough on her hips to prevent viewing of her more intimately, and which was cut so high on her thigh that she probably had to buy from a lingerie shop for her bottoms.

"I'm too young," Naruto declared.

Anko came to a dead stop. "What?"

"Hinata and Sasuke told me I should wait until I'm fifteen before I 'indulge in my baser instincts'."

Anko blinked. "Run that by me again?"

"Besides," Naruto went on. "Sasuke wouldn't be happy if I spent what it'd cost for an hour with you."

"Wow. It's been a while since I met someone so young with a death wish." Anko drew a kunai from the pouch at her hip and twirled it around her fingers. "Either you're stupid, suicidal, or you have the biggest sac..."

"Too young!"

"I'm going to take my time killing you."

"I'm not agreeing to pay!" Naruto insisted. "Snuff probably costs extra."

Anko's face twisted from bloodthirsty to confused. "I'm not a whore, kid."

"Ah, of course. Some prefer 'Lady of the night'," Naruto nodded sagely. "Or 'woman of easy virtue'? 'Soiled dove'? how about 'person of negotiable affection'?"

Anko was across the room in a blink, her left hand lifting Naruto by the throat and slamming him into the wall, snakes slithering from under her sleeve to coil around his limbs as she pointed the kunai at his left eye. "Any... last... wor..." she trailed off as she registered the eyes. She was back on the other side of the room. "HolyshitKyūbi!"

Naruto stomped and crossed his arms. "Great. Another person who judges me for being the jailer."

Anko coughed. "Kid. Are you Uzumaki Naruto?"

"Yeah." Naruto's expression was sullen.

"Are you currently possessed by a demon?"

"No. I'm possessing a demon." His face moved into outright scowling.

Anko decided that T&I personnel were smart enough not to stick the Kyūbi in a low-security room without supervision, so he was probably not the demon. "Why do you think I'm a whore?"

He looked at her, getting to use an expression that he normally saw directed at him: it was the look of someone who cannot quite believe someone is asking such a stupid question. He gestured at her.

Anko looked down at herself, then glowered. "Great," she said, her tone imitating his. "Another person who judges based on my clothes."

Naruto cocked his head. "But you're dressed like a whore..." when her scowl turned murderous, he went on, "I mean, Arisa-chan used to wear that exact outfit. Mostly for her genin clients." He paused. "Well, not *quite* that exact outfit." Naruto gestured to his chest. "She had a better top, but she was a little better endowed. And she's got a little more flesh on her than you do, you've got a flat belly. Less, hip too."

Anko was now looking decidedly confused. "What?"

"You're a little less padded, but you've got more attitude than she does, so that probably makes up for it."

Anko wasn't sure if she was being insulted, so she decided to ignore that. "Who the fuck is 'Arisa-chan'?"

"The whore who taught me how to apply foundation properly."

Anko was more confused than ever. Despite there being better things to do with her time, she couldn't help but probe deeper. "Why was a whore teaching you to apply makeup?"

"Arisa-chan didn't teach me to apply *makeup*. That was Misumi-chan! Especially lipstick and how to do eyeliner better. I got pretty good at most of the stuff, but I've always been pants at hair-coloring. I keep trying to improve things, but no one is happy with orange."

"Why were you learning from whores?"

"Because I was bored and they decided that instead of being alone in my apartment, I should be with human beings, learning skills. That's what Tenuō-Obaasama always said."

Deciding that her meetings could wait, Anko settled herself on the floor, revealing to Naruto's practiced eye, that she had flexibility several orders of magnitude greater than any of the whores he knew, because she managed the feat without flashing anything and ended up *still* not flashing anything while sitting with crossed legs. "Why are you in T&I, kid?"

"I don't know."

Anko barked a laugh. "That's what they all say. D'you know that sooner or later, I always find out differently?" She smirked. "Let's try going through the steps. How come you're in the building?"

"I really don't know, not-a-whore-chan!" Naruto insisted. "I was here to let them know that Sasuke was coming in for an unscheduled, emergency appointment with Inoichi-sama."

"Alright... " Anko motioned for him to go on.

"Well, I was just leaving and I saw scar-man grab Sasuke and drag him into the building. On his way, he grabbed my arm and said 'you're next, brat'. Then he had them search me and put on this jumpsuit and stuck me in here. That was a long time ago!"

"So you're meeting with Yamanaka-sama?"

"I guess?"

"Why are you meeting with him?"

"I don't know! Sasuke's meeting with him because he's been freaking out since Hinata almost died on the mission."

"I think we're coming to the crux of the matter. You were freaking out, too, then."

"No way! Me and Sasuke killed the ones who hurt her and all the ones who threatened to sell her. If anyone ever threatens Hinata, I'll just **KILL THEM** ." For a moment, wisps of red chakra boiled into the

air around Naruto and his eyes had a glint of the all-consuming fury of the beast within. Then it vanished and he was beaming again. "So why worry? Better to just get stronger so she's never hurt again."

"When you say 'all the ones who threatened to sell her'?" Anko studiously decided not to address the fact that for a moment, she had felt claws of icy fear grasp her heart in a way that her old Master had never managed.

"The bad man, Gato, had hired a bunch of thugs and they were going to sell Hinata. So we killed them all. Except Gato. Hinata killed him while we were discussing how to torture him."

Anko's eyebrows rose. "How many are we talking about?"

"I couldn't count, 'cause all the ones I got mostly burnt up, but Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei used their Sharingan and said there were about a hundred."

"And so you're here to work through the guilt?"

"What guilt?" Naruto looked genuinely puzzled. "They were threatening Hinata so I killed them all. Well, except the ones Sasuke got."

Anko looked him over. While she was not psychologist like her superior's superior, she had about a decade of working in interrogation and the kid in front of her had none of the usual marks of the shinobi who just killed because they liked it, but he didn't seem to be harboring any repressed feelings. He seemed to have found the groove that took most ninja years to reach: where killing certain people was just the right thing to do and they didn't let it bother them.

"You're alright, kid." And the smile he gave her was so radiantly happy that for a few moments, the curse mark on her shoulder didn't even twinge.

FMB

The Hokage rubbed his eyes tiredly and repacked his pipe. This was his third in a row, but the tobacco was the only thing keeping his mood even a little stable. "Let me see if I'm understanding your mission report properly, Hatake-jōnin. You decided to proceed with a trio of genin on a mission where the enemy was Momochi Zabuza. Hyūga Hinata was nearly killed, Uchiha Sasuke unlocked some special form of the Sharingan and has had a partial regression in his psychological progress, and Uzumaki Naruto is now intentionally keeping himself partially possessed by the Kyūbi no Yoko? Oh, and both Naruto and Sasuke have between them over a hundred kills to their names and even Hinata has three. Oh and there was the part where Naruto slaughtered dozens of men while embracing the rage of the Kyūbi and from what you've told me, at the least *remembers* it as if he were in complete control at the time. Did I get all of it?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds pretty bad," Kakashi admitted. "I'd prefer to think of it as my genin gaining valuable field experience, having the opportunity to make their first kills with people they have no reason to feel guilty over, and two of them accessing new fonts of power that they can put to use for the village." Kakashi was rather proud of that summation. He'd been planning it since he'd seen the aftermath of his genin's rage-fueled butchery and was pretty sure he'd done the best he could at sanitizing it. "Oh, and got to deal with the fear of losing a teammate without the actual death part."

"And yet, I have Uchiha Sasuke in an emergency meeting with Inoichi and you've scheduled Naruto for the slot right afterwards."

"Just because I don't think they're having any problems with killing doesn't mean I'm right. I want to make sure that a professional helps with anything I missed. And Sasuke really needs to find a better solution than hovering to protect his teammates." Kakashi paused and then corrected himself, "teammate."

"I have reports from the gate guards that the Kyūbi has taken over its container and is rushing through Konoha destroying entire buildings in a single swipe of its hand."

Kakashi looked pointedly out the window at the village which was impressively free of overt destruction.

"Some dozen or so heart attacks attributable to Naruto." Kakashi didn't reply to that one, not sure what he could add. "And as soon as he sees the mission report, Hyūga Hiashi is going to try to kill me, then you, and then possibly the last Uchiha and our Jinchuriki."

"Given the Kyūbi, you could always classify the mission report, Hokage-sama." Kakashi held out a form. Kakashi held out the mission reports to be signed by the Hokage, who scribbled a signature on the official copy for the records, the copy for his personal records, and the mission copy. If he hadn't been so frustrated, he might have noticed a slight problem with that last bit of paperwork.

(A/N Spoon)

Sooo sorry, everyone. We've just been swamped with real life things, between me getting sick and John doing way more adult things than I do, as well as just general schedule conflicts. Updated next will be Itachi, so anyone who reads that too should be happy.